



Communicating Chemical Contaminants to Your Customers

Mike McGill, President

APWA WRX 2019

Background

- Producer, 
- Planning Editor, , Washington, DC
- 12+ Years as Media Relations Manager, Director
- 3+ Years: Public Affairs  Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission
- Director, Customer Relations & Communications  LOUDOUN WATER
- 4+ Years: Chief Communications Officer  Cape Fear Public Utility Authority
Stewardship. Sustainability. Service.
- Founded  WaterPIO
ALWAYS ON CALL



**You must become or stay
THE GO-TO source for information
about your drinking water.**

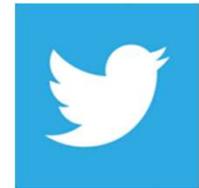


Old Days, Old Ways are OVER

- **Old mindset: “Customers don’t know what I know about water.”
“I’ll tell them what I want when I want.”**
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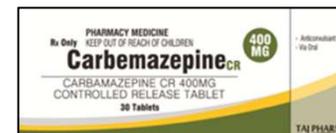
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- **Thanks to social media, those days are OVER.**
- **We live in The Instant Information Age.**
- **Stick with OLD mindset? Playing Russian Roulette with reputation.**
- **Not talking days or weeks of damage. Talking YEARS.**



PFAS & Emerging Contaminants

- **So what are PFAS & ECs? Why are we here?**
- **ECs = Chemicals detected/being detected in trace amounts largely due to advances in water testing**
- **Risks to health & environment not yet understood**
- **Little - if any - health/medical data on almost all of them**
- **EPA "conservative" estimate: 4,500 in nation's source waters**



PFAS & Emerging Contaminants

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- **Man-made chemicals produced since 1940s**
 - Think Teflon & Gore-Tex. Anything water/stain-resistant.
 - Fire-fighting foam. Discoveries near airbases, airports.
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- **Persistent in the environment & ALL OF US. 99.7% of us. Don't break down. Accumulate in body. Blood & organs.**
- **PFOA & PFOS: 2 PFAS phasing out due to associations with adverse health risks. Cancer, thyroid, pregnancy impacts.**





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- **Flint. Shook public confidence across the country.**
- **Shorthand for almost ANY water quality issue**
- **Like Flint, PFAS/EC news could create doubt anywhere**
- **1000s of chemicals are in our nation's water supplies**
- **Found in unexpected places, at unexpected times**
- **Utilities caught off-guard: Reputations can be wiped out in days**

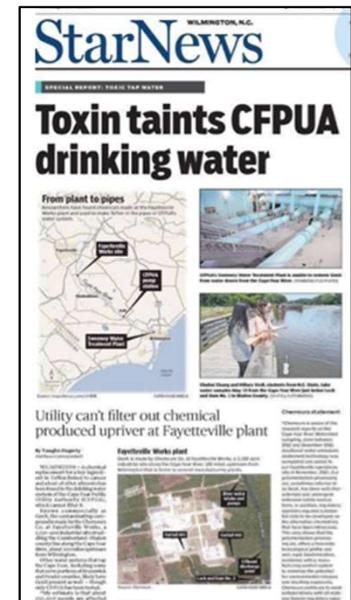


GenX: North Carolina's PFAS

- **2016 NC State study, with cooperation of water utility:**
 - Found several PFASs in Cape Fear River downstream from Chemours plant
 - Drinking water levels well above EPA's "lifetime health advisory" of 70 ppt
 - Sent to experts, activists. Treated as one study. A few PFAS. Limited time. *Then sent to press.*
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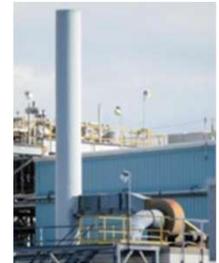
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 - **June 2017: Story hits. Becomes local & national bombshell.**





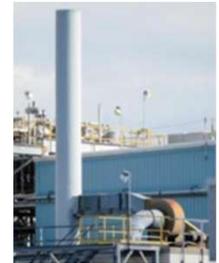
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- **“Discovery Cycle” (To protect public health.)**
 - Fund water testing? Gain news-making, legislative results. Leads to more funding. Likely to gain...
 - Pace of regulatory guidance lags behind
 - UCMRs. 30 at a time. Doesn't mean we get MCLs.
 - Federal and state health advisories differ
 - NC Collaboratory: Creating an "early warning system"



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 - *Did add... More PFAS in next UCMR process. (Details TBD.)*
 - *Development of “Risk Communications” toolkit*



PFAS “Inaction Plan” Problems

- **Widely panned by almost everyone connected to public water**
 - Time & energy wasted. Can kicked for years.
 - Unwillingness to act on PFOA & PFOS despite years of data
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- **Biggest problem for public water? Headlines will require faster action.**
 - States developing own regs to fill federal gaps
 - Hodge-podge of standards on accelerated schedules
 - Testing drawbacks: Utilities reporting data without context, support.
 - Customer confusion & anger guaranteed



Headlines Since “Action Plan”

Frustrated by EPA, states blaze ahead on PFAS

NJ implements nation’s toughest PFAS standard

**MICHIGAN TO DEVELOP STANDARDS FOR PFAS IN
DRINKING WATER**

**Pa. to begin its own process of setting health
limit for two PFAS chemicals**

**Vermont Senate Sets Maximum Contaminant Level For
PFAS**



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PFAS & EC Communications

- **Number #1 Rule: Put yourself in your customers' shoes**
- **J.D. Power Surveys: 1/3 of customers report a “water quality issue”**
- **Biggest mistake: Arrogance. *“You’ll know when we think it’s important.”***
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- **Boost overall communications, social media. Strengthen community ties.**
- **Create COMMS plan for PFAS & EC discoveries:**
 - You’ll be ready whenever/however a story makes news
 - Uses “planned transparency.” Helps you gain trust while exercising control.
 - Contains vetted customer information for multiple platforms

PFAS & EC Messages

- **Lead with messages supporting your important, expert role**
- ***“Based on our knowledge, experience, duty to protect public health”:***
 - *Water is our life. We share your concerns about these discoveries.*
 - *Your water meets/exceeds federal & state standards for safety, quality*
 - *We’re taking action. We will continue to deliver safe, clean water.*
 - *Important information always available from us*
 - *Whenever you are concerned, we’re here. Ask us.*
 - *Stay informed, but use credible sources. Be careful with social media.*

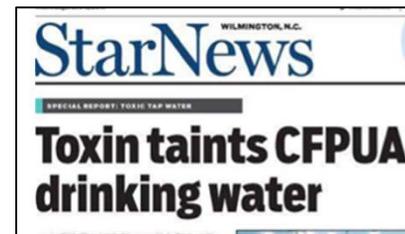
PFAS & EC Messages

- **“Our Duty”**
 - *Hard-working people dedicated to delivering safe, clean water to you. 24/7/365.*
 - *Our families drink the same water.*
- **“Working for you”**
 - *Water is our life. This is our important role in society.*
 - *Working on solutions with regulatory agencies, industry leaders, scientists*
- **“Perspective”**
 - *Explain what EPA & state health advisories are, what they mean*
 - *Testing advances finding “compounds” at parts per trillion levels*
 - *One second in 32,000 years*
 - *The first six inches on a trip to the Sun*
 - *One drop of food coloring in 14 MILLION gallons of water*



Summary

- **PFAS & EC Issues are NOT going away**
 - Advances in water testing
 - Slow regulatory processes
 - “Discovery Cycle”
- **Need to prepare now:**
 - Proactive communications boost public trust
 - Build/strengthen customer relationships, including social media
 - Develop a PFAS & EC COMMS plan
- **Respect the customer.** Planned transparency. Gains control & trust.
- Use “Our Duty,” “Working for You,” & “Perspective” messages





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