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Reducing Lead in School Drinking Water Frequently Asked Questions

Background

In 2017, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 1062, requiring all school districts, education service districts, and public charter schools to adopt a Healthy and Safe Schools Plan. This plan must include provisions for testing and reducing exposure to elevated levels of lead in water used for drinking or food preparation, as required under guidelines adopted by the Oregon Health Authority. The proposed rule provides guidelines for school personnel to follow when testing for lead in drinking water.

How is sampling conducted?

Samples must be collected after water sits overnight in the pipes without being used, to represent the worst-case scenario. Once water is used throughout the day, lead levels are typically lower because the water is not in contact with lead in plumbing fixtures for as much time.

Which taps are required to be sampled?

To meet the intent of the Senate Bill, OHA is proposing that all taps used for drinking or food preparation be tested. Stakeholders wanted more clarity as to which taps did not need to be tested. The rule therefore excludes the following taps that are not normally used for drinking or food preparation: restroom sinks; shower heads; water used for building heating, sanitation, or irrigation; science sinks for grades 6 and up if signed as non-potable. The school should include in their Healthy and Safe Schools plan which taps are used for drinking and food preparation in their schools and ensure they are tested. There is also an exclusion if a building or its plumbing was constructed in 2014 or later, when the allowable amount of lead in plumbing materials was reduced from 8% to 0.25% by weight.

When is mitigation required?

If the lead concentration at a tap used for drinking or food preparation exceeds 15 ppb, access to the tap must be prevented within 48 hours of learning of the results. Further testing is needed to determine the source of the lead. Mitigation options include disconnecting the tap, replacing the faucet or plumbing as appropriate, installing a treatment unit certified to remove lead, or instituting a routine flushing program. The tap must test below 15 ppb to be placed back into service.

The US Environmental Protection Agency recommends mitigation when lead levels exceed 20 ppb. Oregon decided that 15 ppb was a reasonable level for mitigation, since it is more protective than the federal recommendation and provides a buffer in case levels increase before the next round of testing. Again, most water used throughout the day will have a much lower lead concentration because water is not sitting in the pipes overnight. It is always a good idea to let water flow out of a tap until it gets noticeably colder before using it for drinking or food preparation.

What is the required testing frequency?

These rules propose that initial testing be done at all drinking and food preparation taps at all schools by 2020, and every 6 years thereafter according to a schedule determined by the Oregon Department of Education. Initial testing is intended to identify problem taps or plumbing, and once resolved, should not have issues in the future. On-going testing is required to determine whether water quality changes or plumbing deterioration has caused more lead to be released.