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Lead Testing Boom in Pittsburgh in Response to Flint Crisis

In the past few months, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority has received an increased number of lead test requests from residential customers who fear that their tap water contains dangerously high levels of lead, said Gina Cyprych during a facilities tour.

This heightened demand for lead testing, said Cyprych, PWSA’s laboratory and water quality manager and environmental compliance coordinator, can be attributed to the recent national news coverage of the Flint, Mich. water crisis.

In 2014, the Flint water authority chose to supply its residents with water from the Flint River instead of Lake Huron, the city’s prior water source, in an attempt to reduce costs, said CNN.com. The change resulted in the leaching of lead and iron from service line pipes into residents’ water, said CNN.com, because the water authority failed to treat the Flint River’s dangerously corrosive water properly.

Cyprych said that in a three week span this year PWSA conducted 230 lead tests as compared to the 50 that they normally handle per year, forcing PWSA’s on-site laboratory to outsource most of the testing to another water quality laboratory to return the customers’ their test results in an appropriate amount of time.

PWSA estimates that five to 10 percent of all the 83,000 customer tap tie-ins are made from lead piping and that the process of updating residential service lines typically costs $7,000 to $10,000 each, said Cyprych.

The Allegheny River however, from which PWSA may draw up to 100 million gallons of water daily, is nowhere near as corrosive to pipes as the Flint River, said Cyprych. Additionally, Cyprych said that PWSA’s pipe lines (which feed into the residential service lines) are all brass and essentially lead free, and that PWSA will soon undergo a $25 million, two year project to upgrade its filters.

Cyprych said that PWSA customers concerned about their water quality and safety may request lead testing kits free of charge and have the option to purchase in-home lead filters for additional safety assurance.