

Water Front- Peter Mantius

*Environmental politics in New York's Finger Lakes*

---

# Tap Water in Watkins Glen, Montour Falls, Seneca County Tests Positive for PFAS Chemicals

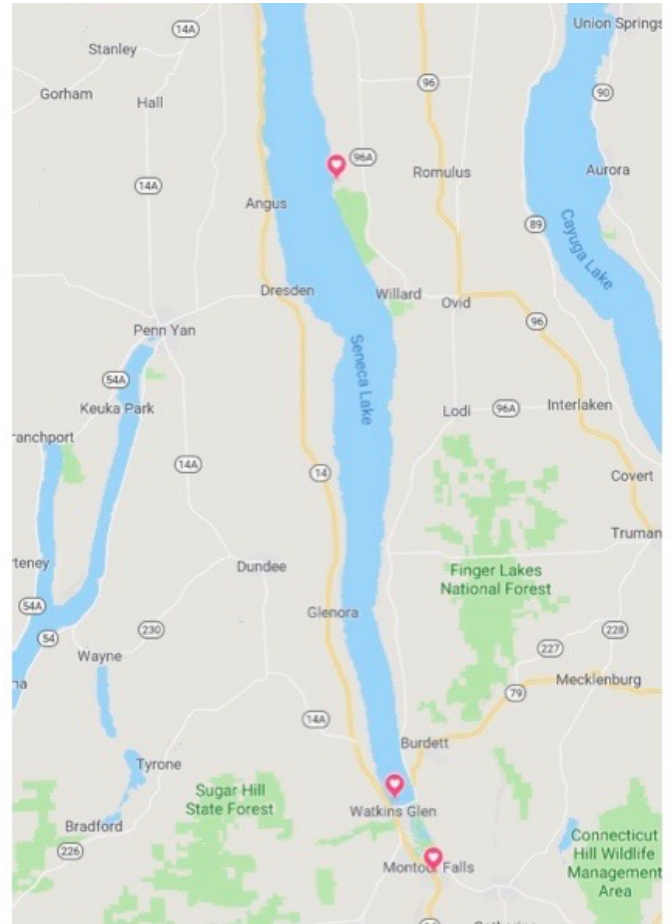
Peter Mantius / August 30, 2019September 6, 2019 / Uncategorized



**Recent tests show that three**



**public water systems near Seneca Lake (marked in red in map at right) have elevated levels of PFAS chemicals, a class of highly toxic substances found in stain-repellent products. Dangerous in extremely low doses (a few parts per trillion), they have been linked to various cancers and disruptions of the endocrine and immune systems.**



WATKINS GLEN, Aug. 30, 2019 — Public drinking water in Watkins Glen, Montour Falls and Seneca County contains elevated levels of the cancer-linked PFAS class of chemicals found in dozens of stain-repellent household products like Teflon and Scotchguard, recent tests show.

The results from a University of Michigan chemical lab fall within recently proposed enforceable New York State limits for two of the group's most notorious variants — PFOA and PFOS.

But they easily exceed the more stringent standards recommended by many scientists and several environmental groups. For example, the [National Resources Defense Council](https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/assessment-for-addressing-pfas-chemicals-in-michigan-drinking-water.pdf) (<https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/assessment-for-addressing-pfas-chemicals-in-michigan-drinking-water.pdf>) recommended in March a maximum contaminant level of 2 parts per trillion for any combination of four key PFAS chemicals.

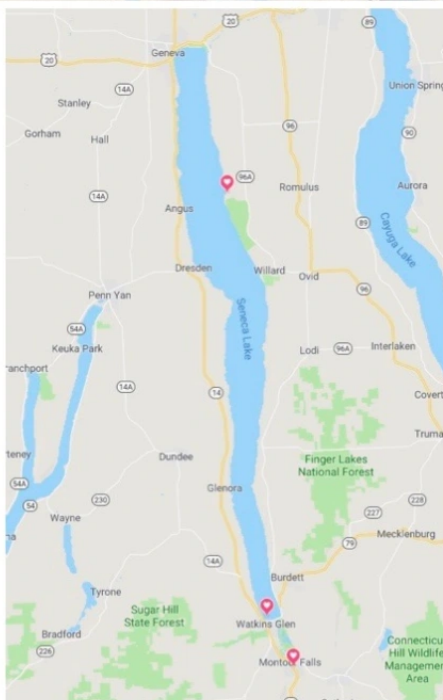
Tests for 14 PFAS variants in Watkins Glen water registered a combined 21.0 parts per trillion, while tap water drawn from a Waterloo plant in Seneca County came in at 17.6 ppt, and water from Montour Falls registered 13.7 ppt.

Water from private wells near the former Seneca Army Depot in Romulus had combined PFAS readings of 20.0 ppt, 5.0 ppt and 4.1 ppt.

The [state recently proposed](#)



**Recent tests show that three public water systems near Seneca Lake (marked in red in map at right) have elevated levels of PFAS chemicals, a class of highly toxic substances found in stain-repellent products. Dangerous in extremely low doses (a few parts per trillion), they have been linked to various cancers and disruptions of the endocrine and immune systems.**



(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/nysregister6pages.pdf>) 10 ppt as an enforceable limit for both PFOA and PFOS, substances that are no longer manufactured in the U.S.

“The proposed state standards won’t protect the public,” said Mary Anne Kowalski, research director for Seneca Lake Guardian, which arranged for the Michigan lab to conduct the tests.

For more details on the tests, including their limitations, and for reaction from Schuyler County officials, see [here](#)

**Seneca Lake Guardian  
2019 PFAS Pilot Study**  
Testing performed by Freshwater Future at  
University of Michigan, Biological Research Station, Analytical Chemistry  
Laboratory



Analyte	Concentration (ppt)					
	Watkins Glen PWS	Seneca County PWS	Montour Falls PWS	96A Kendaia	96 A Smith Vineyard	96 A Baptist Church
PFOA	3.0	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFOS	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFBS	2.7	3.9	4.0	5.9	BRL	BRL
PFHxA	11.7	10.1	5.5	6.5	BRL	BRL
PFHpA	3.7	3.6	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFHxS	BRL	BRL	4.2	8.0	5.0	4.1
PFNA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFDA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFUnA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
N-MeFOSAA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
N-EtFOSAA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFDoA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFTTrDA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
PFTA	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL	BRL
<b>Total PFAS</b>	<b>21.0</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>4.1</b>

The samples labeled 96 A were collected near the southwest border of the Seneca Army Depot. The others were collected from Public Water Supplies.

(<https://waterfrontonline.blog/2019/09/05/schuyler-county-officials-say-fears-of-water-contamination-are-likely-overblown-but-promise-new-pfas-tests/>).

“Our results demonstrate that they need to be lower and cover more chemicals,” she added. “Seneca Lake Guardian will be working with other organizations and elected officials to inform the public about the risks.”

Terry Wilcox, superintendent of public works in Watkins Glen, declined to comment on the test results for the water system he supervises.

The state [Department of Environmental Conservation](https://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/108831.html) (<https://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/108831.html>) referred questions about drinking water to the state Department of Health.

DOH (<http://www.astho.org/Environmental-Health/Water-Safety/Risk-Communication-of-Waterborne-Contaminants/Communicating-the-Risks-of-PFAS-New-York-State-Department-of-Health/>) spokesman Jonah Bruno declined to comment on the Michigan lab's results from the Seneca Lake-area samples. Instead he provided a general statement (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/brunostatement1.pdf>) about the proposed DOH limits.

"It's hard to believe there's still no urgency at the state level for finding the source of the (PFAS) contamination and remediating it," said Judith Enck, former regional supervisor at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Enck, who helped expose a PFAS contamination scandal in Hoosick Falls drinking water in 2015, said the DOH needs to conduct more tests and, above all, go public with its results.

The state's proposed new limits for PFOA and PFOS were prompted by the Hoosick Falls water crisis. The state took months to share what it knew about the dire nature of the contamination before it finally ordered a ban on drinking the town water.

The public furor prompted Gov. Andrew Cuomo to create a drinking water task force that recommended the new PFOA and PFOS standards. His administration also obtained millions of dollars from a manufacturer suspected of generating the pollution. The money was used to finance the installation a sophisticated filter system that has restored the relative purity of Hoosick Falls water.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the DOH conducted spot-checks on roughly 450 other water systems statewide, picking sites based on a list of suspected violators developed by the DEC.

The agencies later acknowledged that test results showed that dozens systems would have failed to meet the new limits for PFOA and/or PFOS. From those results, they projected that 21 percent of the state's water systems would exceed the proposed limits for the two toxic substances. The costs to remediate will run into the many hundreds of millions of dollars, the DOH said.

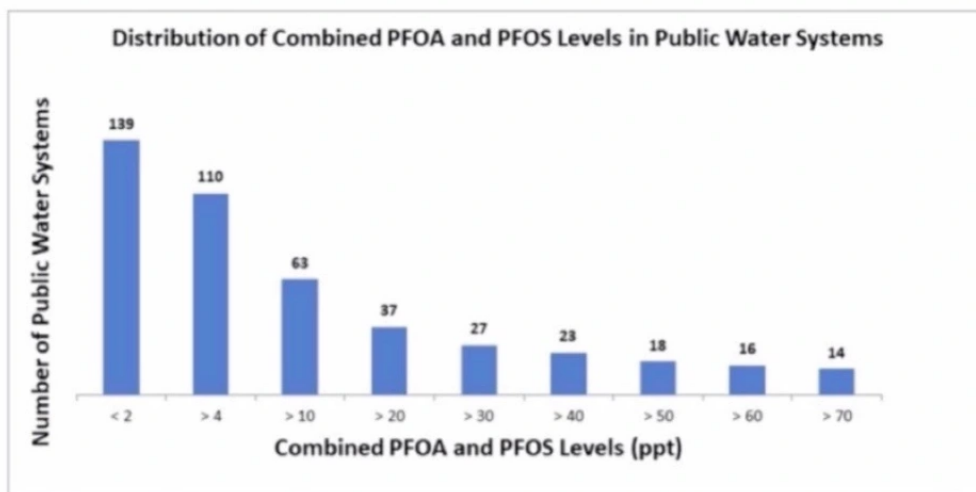
But state officials have refused to identify the water systems that had test results exceeding the new limits. The agencies have repeatedly delayed public requests under the Freedom of Information Law that seek to pry loose that data.



**Mary Anne Kowalski, left, and Yvonne Taylor of Seneca Lake Guardian, with Judith Enck, right.**

# Distribution of PFOA and PFOS in NYS

WaterFront filed a FOIL request with the DEC in April to obtain the test results for water systems within the Finger Lakes region. In May, the agency said it expected to deliver the requested information by mid-July. In July, it said it expected to deliver it in August. In August.



135 Public Water Systems in NYS have combined levels of PFOA and PFOS above 20 ppt, as shown in a DOH chart (above). A second DOH chart says an estimated 645 Public Water Systems would need to spend an average of \$1.325 million for upgrades to comply with the recommended 10 ppt maximum contaminant level for each of the two chemicals.

## PFOA / PFOS Occurrence and Treatment Cost Summary for Community Systems

Target MCL (ppt)	Estimated % Community Water Systems Requiring Treatment	Estimated Number of Community Water Systems Requiring Treatment	Total Statewide Estimated Capital Cost*	Total Statewide Estimated Annual O&M Cost
4	40%	1,125	\$1,500,000,000	\$78,000,000
10	23%	645	\$855,000,000	\$45,000,000
20	14%	410	\$544,000,000	\$29,000,000
36	10%	276	\$366,000,000	\$19,000,000

\*Cost estimates assume \$1,325,000 capital cost per treatment system, weighted based on number of small (2,513), mid-size (180), and large (156) community water systems in NYS



(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/decresponsetomyfoil1.pdf>) it said it expected to provide the requested information in September.

Similarly, the DOH has repeatedly postponed providing PFAS data requested last November by SLG’s Kowalski. In its most recent letter to Kowalski, that agency said it expected to deliver on her request in November — a full year out from the original request.

“The (DEC and DOH) should be releasing every piece of information they have on PFAS contamination,” said Liz Moran of the New York Public Interest Research Group. “It shouldn’t be kept secret because it’s about people’s health.

“They could course-correct right now by holding public hearings. They public has a basic right to know.”



**Liz Moran of NYPIRG**

extensive report in March.

NYPIRG and Environmental Advocates of New York both support the NRDC recommendation for a limit of 2 parts per trillion for any combination of PFAS class chemicals — far below the 10 ppt each for PFOA and PFOS that the DOH has proposed.

In fact, manufacturers have quit using those two well-studied substances and often replaced them with PFAS variants collectively referred to as PFAS “GenX” that may be at least as dangerous.

“If we regulate only a handful of PFAS, there will be swift regrettable substitution with other, similarly toxic PFAS — creating an ongoing problem where addressing one chemical at a time incentivizes the use of other toxic chemicals,” NRDC said in its

“The replacement of PFOA with GenX is a perfect example of regrettable substitution,” the study added.

NRDC recommends a limit of 5 ppt for any combination of GenX chemicals.

PFOA was once used by DuPont to make Teflon, while PFOS was an ingredient in 3M’s Scotchguard.

The two banned substances were also key elements in firefighting foam used to suppress petroleum infernos, mostly at airports and fire training facilities.

That’s caused problems for the Department of Defense, which used the foam at dozens of military bases across the country, including the former Seneca Army Depot in Romulus. Virtually all those bases have documented PFAS contamination.

In the case of the Seneca Army Depot, one reading reached 89,000 ppt — prompting Seneca Lake Guardian to call for an urgent mapping of the inevitable pollution plume.

Last year, in spot tests of two wells west of the depot, the DOH found combined PFAS of 81 ppt at one and 65 ppt at the other (combined PFOA and PFOS were roughly half those totals at each). A well east of the depot showed total PFAS of 8 ppt, all from PFOS or PFOA, according to DOH documents Kowalski obtained from local officials.

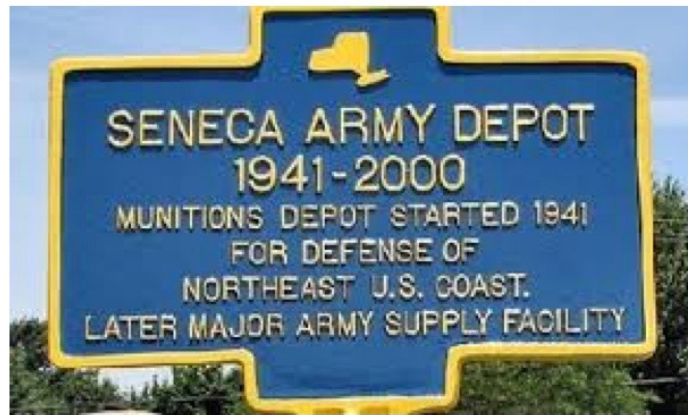
“There are currently dairy cattle grazing and agricultural crops growing at sites of contamination on the Army Depot,” SLG said in a [March 1, 2019 letter](https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/senecalakeguardiandohletterpfoa.pdf) (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/senecalakeguardiandohletterpfoa.pdf>) to the DOH. “The depot is in a popular deer hunting area and Cayuga and Seneca Lakes are popular for fishing....(A) complete lack of information leaves our area at risk and we cannot wait any longer for the necessary remediation.



“The PFAS at the depot does not appear to be affecting Seneca Lake, the drinking water source for over 100,000 people. However, the plume is heading to the lake, and the state should not stand by until it happens.”

The DOH responded

**DEC officials took part in this 2018 deer hunt at the former Seneca Army Depot in 2018. While several states have tested deer, fish, cattle and crops for PFAS contamination, the NYS Department of Health declined to describe its plant and animal testing.**



(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/dohresponsetoslgapr192019.pdf>) six weeks later in a letter to SLG that said:

“Discussions on PFAS contamination between the agencies and the Army are ongoing. We will continue collaborating and requesting that actions are taken expeditiously.”

The some 4,700 members of the PFAS class are known as “forever chemicals” because they do not readily break down in the environment.

Studies have linked PFAS substances with testicular, kidney, liver and pancreatic cancer, as well as problems with the endocrine and immune systems. They are also associated with lower birth rates, weight gain and high cholesterol.

Despite growing scientific alarm about the dangers of PFAS, the federal EPA has been reluctant to take decisive action.



In the wake of the Hoosick Falls crisis, the agency did lower its advisory level for PFOA and PFOS from 400 ppt to 70 ppt — far higher than most current scientific estimates of what is a safe dose. Even so, that 70 ppt federal limit is not enforceable.



Know your environment.  
Protect your health.

In February, the EPA (<https://www.epa.gov/pfas/epas-pfas-action-plan>) released its “PFAS Action Plan.” Several environmental groups, including the Environmental Working Group, were under- impressed and testified to

that effect before Congress. EWG

([https://cdn.ewg.org/sites/default/files/testimony/EWG%20Testimony%20for%20the%20Record-min.pdf?\\_ga=2.264988623.190547203.1567151965-763127738.1503070112](https://cdn.ewg.org/sites/default/files/testimony/EWG%20Testimony%20for%20the%20Record-min.pdf?_ga=2.264988623.190547203.1567151965-763127738.1503070112)) claims that a number of its recommendations made it into proposed legislation.

In recent weeks, both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives have passed PFAS regulation bills that have been incorporated into the must-pass FY 2020 Defense Authorization Bill.

According to news reports

(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/trumpthreatensvetooverpfas.pdf>), President Trump has threatened to veto the bill over his objections to the PFAS amendments.

## Published by Peter Mantius

I am a journalist who lives in Watkins Glen, NY. I write about the environment and politics on my website, [Waterfrontonline.blog](http://Waterfrontonline.blog). For more detail on my background, see the "Peter's Bio" section on that site. [View all posts by Peter Mantius](#)

## 3 Comments

**Marcia Douglas** says: August 31, 2019 at 1:17 pm

If the actual source of the chem was mentioned, I missed it.  
Thanks for the heads up.

Another site needing study is the possibility of Bregen (sp) Dairy Farm waste contamination into Catherine Creek.

Marcia  
Marcia

[Reply](#)

1. 1.

**Peter Mantius** says:[August 31, 2019 at 4:28 pm](#)

The PFAS class are man-made chemicals. Very unlikely that farm waste would be behind the PFAS readings for Watkins Glen and Montour Falls. That said, scientists are saying the waste (heavy in phosphorus & nitrogen) from huge farms like the Bergens' may be playing a big role in the toxic algae epidemic.

[Reply](#)

2.

**Virginia Alexander** says:[September 2, 2019 at 10:45 pm](#)

Where would it be coming from in those large amounts? No major cities or factories in the lake. This is a travesty.

[Reply](#)

*[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)*