

## **The Hidden Cost of Contamination: How Environmental Toxins Are Poisoning U.S. Communities and Why Legal Action Is Essential**

Across the United States, a slow-moving but relentless crisis is unfolding beneath our feet and in our water taps. From invisible chemicals leaching into groundwater to microplastic particles swirling through our rivers and air, environmental toxins—largely the byproduct of industrial and corporate activities—have become an urgent public health and economic issue. Municipalities and water districts are on the front lines of this crisis, left to clean up pollution they didn't create and manage the consequences for their residents. This paper explores the scope of the problem, its staggering health and environmental costs, and the powerful legal tools available to hold polluters accountable.

### **A Nationwide Contamination Crisis**

The chemicals involved in this crisis are not obscure or rare. They are widespread, deeply embedded in the fabric of modern industrial life, and shockingly persistent.

Take PFAS—per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—often referred to as “forever chemicals” because they do not break down in the environment or the human body. Used in everything from firefighting foam to nonstick cookware, PFAS have now been detected in the drinking water of an estimated 49% of U.S. households, according to the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, more than 120,000 facilities across the country may have used or released PFAS. In many cases, the communities affected had no idea their water had been compromised until health concerns or testing exposed the threat.

Then there are microplastics -- tiny plastic fragments no larger than a sesame seed --which result from the breakdown of consumer products and industrial waste. These particles have permeated our ecosystems so thoroughly that they've been found in bottled water, table salt, and even the air we breathe. In the Great Lakes, which supply drinking water to more than 40 million people, microplastic pollution has been deemed unsafe for aquatic life in over 90% of samples taken in recent years. These particles don't just clutter the water—they absorb toxic chemicals, creating a delivery mechanism for poisons to enter fish, wildlife, and human beings.

Other toxic compounds, from benzene and heavy metals to undisclosed petrochemicals, continue to leak into our environment through oil and gas operations, manufacturing, and waste disposal. In Colorado alone, over 30 million pounds of potentially hazardous chemicals have been injected underground by oil firms since mid-2023, even after a state law required public disclosure of fracking materials. This kind of systemic evasion is not the exception—it's increasingly the norm.

### **Public Health and Environmental Fallout**

The human cost of exposure to these toxins is both well-documented and deeply alarming. PFAS chemicals have been linked to a wide array of medical conditions, including thyroid disorders, developmental issues, elevated cholesterol, immune suppression, and various forms of cancer. Microplastics, while a newer concern, are showing up in human organs and bloodstreams, raising profound questions about their long-term effects. Many of these substances not only resist decomposition but also bioaccumulate, meaning they build up in the bodies of animals and people over time, increasing toxicity with each exposure.

But the impact extends beyond individual health to the health of entire ecosystems. Contaminated lakes, rivers, and aquifers disrupt local agriculture, kill off fish populations, and degrade land value. Polluted air from industrial sites or chemical blowouts can render neighborhoods uninhabitable. And as more land is poisoned or restricted for public use, the economic burden on communities intensifies.

## **Municipalities Bear the Financial Weight**

Despite the fact that corporations and manufacturers are the primary sources of this pollution, the cost of cleanup is increasingly falling to municipalities and regional water districts. According to EPA projections, compliance with proposed PFAS limits alone could cost U.S. water systems up to \$3.5 billion annually, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. And that figure does not include the enormous, often decades-long costs of treating contaminated land, replacing infrastructure, or responding to public health crises.

Consider the \$850 million settlement paid by 3M to the state of Minnesota in 2018 to address PFAS contamination. That figure represented only a portion of the damages incurred. Across the country, communities face mounting liabilities with limited budgets—and in most cases, no choice but to pay up in order to ensure basic public safety.

## **The Legal Imperative**

This is where litigation becomes not only a strategy but a necessity. The legal system provides a path for municipalities to demand accountability from the companies that caused this damage. Dozens of lawsuits have already led to substantial verdicts and settlements, but the scope of contamination demands more aggressive, coordinated legal action. Federal and state laws, including the Clean Water Act, Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, and state-level toxic tort statutes, offer municipalities leverage to pursue justice and compensation.

Legal action also drives change. Lawsuits force transparency where none existed. They generate regulatory pressure. And perhaps most importantly, they create financial consequences significant enough to alter corporate behavior. The bottom line is this: if polluters are not held financially accountable, they will continue to treat contamination as a cost of doing business—one that municipalities and their residents are left to absorb.