PREV

NEXT

Colorado shouldn’t pipe toxins into its future | OPINION

By **By Michael K. Dorsey and Maya Wheeler** 06/10/2025 | updated 7 months ago

PREV

NEXT

Did you know your drinking water's safety might depend on a critical choice some policymakers across Colorado are making right now? As the state invests millions into upgrading its water infrastructure, there's an often-overlooked decision on the table: what kind of materials should we use to deliver safe drinking water?

According to Denver Water's own estimates, about 30% of the water mains across their system are polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic pipes as one option for getting clean water to end customers. This should raise alarm bells for those who care about the long-term safety of our drinking water. There is a growing awareness the health and environmental consequences of PVC are deleterious and far-reaching. Continuing reliance on PVC piping is a dangerous gamble that Colorado cannot afford to take.

PVC is made from the dangerous and toxic chemical, vinyl chloride, and fossil fuels. During its production, the processes used to create it releases some of the most toxic chemicals known to science, such as dioxins, into the air. These aren't just

PREV

NEXT

including cancer, compromised immune function and reproductive issues.

Stay up to speed: Sign up for daily opinion in your inbox Monday-Friday

Colorado is striving to be at the forefront of climate and environmental responsibility. However, selecting a material very directly tied to high greenhouse gas emissions and toxic pollution undermines that progress.

It also puts our investments at risk.

Various studies, including from a congressional report compiled with input from the Environmental Protection Agency, have pointed to our national water infrastructure needs likely

PREV

NEXT

important investments we'll make to ensure clean, safe drinking water is available for future generations.

Although federal funding remains in flux thanks to many of the stochastically stunod actions of the Trump administration, we cannot waver in our commitment to replacing dangerous lead pipes and modernizing our aging water distribution infrastructure. But let's be clear: investing Colorado's hard-earned tax dollars in PVC pipes would be a shortsighted mistake future generations would pay for.

Recently the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) determined vinyl chloride was a "high priority substance" that warranted a fulsome investigation on just how risky exposure to human health and the environment was from vinyl chloride. PVC is not just used in drinking water pipes; it is also used in vinyl floor coverings, house siding, furniture and even in some toys our children play with. The dangers aren't new either; back in the late 1970s, the EPA already recognized the threat and banned this chemical from aerosol sprays, drugs and cosmetics.

The EPA's review process, although likely to take some time,

PREV

NEXT

vinyl chloride in these pipes poses an unreasonable risk to our families and communities? We must prepare for this possibility now not later.

We need only look at East Palestine, Ohio, to see how terrifyingly real the risk of vinyl chloride is as that community is still dealing with the fallout of the terrible train derailment and explosion from the vinyl chloride moved over rail in high pressure tanks.

Even after being installed, PVC pipes aren't risk-free. Under heat, pressure, or in the presence of disinfectants commonly used in water treatment, PVC can leach harmful additives and microplastics into drinking water. This threat is especially alarming in Colorado, where many small and rural water systems already face infrastructure and contamination challenges. Our families deserve peace of mind regarding their water supply's safety.

Then there's the issue of disposal. PVC cannot be recycled and doesn't biodegrade. When it breaks, it becomes long-lasting waste. When it's burned, it releases even more toxins. For a state with strong commitments to reducing landfill use and building a circular economy, PVC drinking water pipes are simply incompatible.

Colorado prides itself on being forward-thinking on climate

PREV

NEXT

cannot afford. The integrity of our water systems and the legacy we leave for future generations demands more thoughtful solutions — because in Colorado, sustainability is not just a conversation; it's a way of life.

Dr. Michael K. Dorsey is director of the Walton Sustainability Solutions Service, and has advised Denver Water on the downsides of PVC. Maya Wheeler is executive director of the Wezesha Dada Center.

Colorado Politics Must-Reads: