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## Drinking water study faults old pipes, obsolete plants

By Jennifer C. Kerr, Associated Press, 6/12/2003

WASHINGTON -- Aging pipes and outdated treatment plants threaten the nation's drinking water systems, says an environmental group that reviewed 19 cities.

Treatment plants, many of them using nearly century-old technology, are simply not up to the task of cleaning up contaminants, said Erik Olson, author of the report by the Natural Resources Defense Council. Pipes carrying water often are old, too, in some cities dating back more than a century, he said.

There was good news as well as bad.

Overall, drinking water purity has improved slightly in most cities in the past 15 years, the study said.

Chicago was singled out for its tap water, earning an "excellent" rating for water quality and compliance with regulations in 2001. Five cities -- Denver; New Orleans; Manchester, N.H.; Baltimore; and Detroit -- were rated good.

Eight got marks of fair: Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Newark, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington.

While no city received a failing mark, five were given poor ratings: Albuquerque; Boston; Fresno, Calif.; Phoenix; and San Francisco.

"People would be surprised to know that their water contains cancer-causing chemicals, toxic chemicals like lead, that it often contains the remnants of pollutants like sewage that slip through some of the treatment plants," said Olson. Mike Keegan, an analyst with the National Rural Water Association, which represents 22,000 utilities and communities, took issue with the report.

"There's always been an issue of replacing infrastructure," he said, "but now there's more and better infrastructure in the country" than ever, and compliance with water regulations and standards has been improving.

Environmental Protection Agency spokesman John Millett said that while there are problems in some cities, the vast majority are meeting water quality standards.

Millett said the Bush administration has committed \$850 million a year through 2018 to help the nation's drinking water systems.

However, the environmental group said, it would take up to \$500 billion over the next 20 years to fix the systems.

The group cited arsenic, chromium, and the rocket fuel perchlorate as particularly dangerous. All can end up in the water from industry and manufacturing.

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