Arsenic occurs naturally in rocks and soil, water, air, and plants and animals. It can be further released into the environment through natural activities such as volcanic action, erosion of rocks, and forest fires, or through human actions. Approximately 90 percent of industrial arsenic in the U.S. is currently used as a wood preservative, but arsenic is also used in paints, dyes, metals, drugs, soaps, and semi-conductors. Agricultural applications, mining, and smelting also contribute to arsenic releases in the environment.

Higher levels of arsenic tend to be found more in ground water sources than in surface water sources (i.e., lakes and rivers) of drinking water. Compared to the rest of the United States, western states have more systems with arsenic levels greater than 10 ppb. Parts of the Midwest and New England have some systems whose current arsenic levels are greater than 10 ppb, but more systems with arsenic levels that range from 2-10 ppb. While many systems may not have detected arsenic in their drinking water above 10 ppb, there may be geographic “hot spots” with systems that have higher levels of arsenic than the predicted occurrence for that area.

Cost

The average increase in household cost for water that meets the new arsenic standards depends on the size of the water system and how many people are served by that system. For small community water systems (those serving fewer than 10,000 people), the increase in cost is expected to range between $38 and $327. For community water systems that serve greater than 10,000 people, annual household costs for water are expected to increase from $0.06 to $32.

Systems may apply for financial assistance through EPA’s drinking water state revolving fund. Since 1996, EPA’s drinking water state revolving fund program has made available $3.6 billion to assist drinking water systems with projects to improve their infrastructure. EPA has funded over 1000 loans for projects around the country. In addition to financial assistance, compliance period extensions of up to 9 years (resulting in a total compliance period of 14 years) are available to small systems through an exemption process.