

Biden Administration Allocates \$9 Million to Virgin Islands for Lead Pipe Replacement

As part of a national initiative, the Lead and Copper Rule Improvements aim to remove lead pipes, enhance water testing protocols, and improve community awareness about drinking water safety

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The U.S. Virgin Islands is set to receive a boost in its water infrastructure efforts as the Biden administration finalized a rule on October 8 requiring all U.S. drinking water systems to identify and replace lead pipes within the next decade.

Under the Lead and Copper Rule Improvements (LCRI), \$9.075 million has been allocated to the territory through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This funding will be directed through Drinking

Water State Revolving Funds (DWSRFs) and is intended to support lead pipe replacement and inventory projects. Nearly half of this amount must be distributed as grants or forgiven loans, targeting disadvantaged communities.

EPA Regional Administrator Lisa F. Garcia emphasized that the new rule and accompanying funding would ensure safe drinking water for all residents of the Virgin Islands, especially for communities facing additional challenges. “Parents should never have to worry about their children consuming water contaminated with lead,” she stated. V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol also welcomed the funds. “Although the USVI does not have a history with the presence of lead in our drinking water system, we are deeply grateful for the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to ensuring the health and safety of our communities,” he said. “The \$9 million being provided allows the USVI to replace the remaining non-compliant lead components, ensuring the continued safety of our community.”

Nationwide, the LCRI mandates that drinking water systems not only identify and replace lead pipes but also implement stricter testing protocols and improve community communication about lead risks. The initiative is part of the administration's broader environmental justice effort, aiming to eliminate disparities faced by low-income and minority communities disproportionately affected by legacy lead pipes.

Michael S. Regan, EPA administrator, expressed that the administration’s efforts would finally end this public health threat. “President Biden is putting an end to this generational public health problem,” he noted. Manish Bapna, CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council, echoed the sentiment, stating that every individual deserves access to safe drinking water, irrespective of their location or income level.

Although lead exposure remains a critical issue nationwide, the Virgin Islands do not have a significant history of lead contamination in their water systems. However, the allocated funding is aimed at ensuring continued compliance and safety. Scientific studies confirm that lead is a potent neurotoxin, with children being the most vulnerable. It can cause irreversible developmental damage, learning disabilities, and long-term health effects. For adults, lead exposure increases risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer.

The LCRI is projected to yield economic benefits that outweigh its costs by up to 13 times, according to the EPA. Alongside funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the initiative aims to accelerate the removal of lead pipes across the country and create jobs in the process. Cities like Milwaukee, Detroit, Erie, and Denver have already begun leveraging federal funds to fast-track their lead pipe replacement efforts.

As part of its broader commitment, the EPA is also offering \$35 million in competitive grants to further reduce lead levels in drinking water. The agency has developed a comprehensive approach, including technical assistance programs and practical tools, to help communities implement these changes effectively.