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State to Spend Millions on Drinking Water Projects in N.H.

By [RICK GANLEY \(/PEOPLE/RICK-GANLEY\)](/PEOPLE/RICK-GANLEY) & [MARY MCINTYRE \(/PEOPLE/MARY-MCINTYRE\)](/PEOPLE/MARY-MCINTYRE) • OCT 18, 2017

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A Senate advisory commission next month will choose to fund several major projects improving drinking water across New Hampshire communities.

More than \$200 million from a settlement with Exxon-Mobil over MTBE contamination has been set aside for funding these projects.

Robert Scott is the commissioner of the Department of Environmental Services. He's also on the Drinking Water and Groundwater Advisory Commission. Morning Edition Host Rick Ganley spoke with him about issues with drinking

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water in the state.



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This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity.

This lawsuit with Exxon-Mobil goes back to the early 2000s. The attorney general has said that this is the state's most significant environmental victory, in fact. Let's remind listeners what this lawsuit is all about.

A lot of you may remember when lead was an additive in gasoline. That was obviously discovered to be an additive that's harmful for the environment. So back starting in the 70s MTBE was added to oxygenate gasoline.

To reduce smog and pollution

Exactly. That obviously, over time, became an issue for groundwater contamination. MTBE reacts in a way in water that moves very quickly, and we found a large contamination issues all through the state. So MTBE was banned in the state, and you don't see that in the gasoline anymore. But the leftovers from that all were contaminated sites. We ended up with a global settlement for the state for most of the petroleum suppliers with the exception of Exxon Mobil. That was brought to court. Ultimately through the court and all the process in the court, the state was awarded what amounts to today, with interest, over \$278 million, and that is the funding for the trust fund that you mentioned.

And so now that this money is in state hands, tell us more about the drinking water projects that are on the docket here. How will the commission go about choosing which communities to fund, and are there any specific criteria?

Overall there's three categories that are being looked at in the short term. The committee is meeting on Nov. 2 to potentially vote on those. There's 21 drinking water infrastructure projects. There's a source water protection project and there's a water sampling project. All of those, if you look at the distribution, basically encompass all the state. There's communities all through the state that would be impacted by those projects.

Several smaller communities throughout the state are struggling with private wealth contamination. You know there's PFOA, and of course MTBE contamination in particular. Is one of the main goals to connect more communities with public municipal water? Is that going to be something that's front and center when this criteria is looked at?

Absolutely, that's a primary objective—to see more infrastructure. Another project that will be discussed on [Nov. 2], we're calling it the Southern New Hampshire Regional Water Project. But we have a lot of MTBE, especially contamination Atkinson. [It would] involve Atkinson, Derry, Hampstead, Plastow, Salem and Wyndham potentially. And that would really involve getting infrastructure so we can get people with contaminated water on their private wells on the public drinking water systems ideally.

To people with private well-water who are saying, you know, I need to do something about this now. I can't live with this water. I can't drink this water. I've been using bottled water for so long. Can the state offer any help to private homeowners with wells that just can't wait to be hooked up, can't wait the year and a half, two years it might take for a project to come to fruition?

So those areas, for instance Litchfield with Saint-Gobain, we want to get pipes in the ground sooner rather than later to give them a solution. There's a potential for those who need it, and maybe getting public water, meaning a pipe coming to your house, maybe is not practical. So there's what's called a port of entry treatment systems. So those are an option also. Unfortunately, and again there's a lot of moving parts here, so I am very sympathetic to people saying okay enough already. We need to do something. So that's something the department has been working on very closely. There's a lot of focus of late on perfluorinated chemicals, you know, PFAS. But we have, again I mentioned dioxin. That's still an issue, and we still have obviously the money came from MTBE issues. That's still very large in the state, and then on top of that we still have a lot of other contaminants that are worrisome. Arsenic: we have over 60,000 private wells in New Hampshire that exceed the state set standard.

Having this settlement I imagine has opened the door to a lot of projects that were going to be a bottleneck for a long time.

The only thing I'm pleased with in this whole situation is that we actually have this settlement money that we're able to use. So you know we could be in a lot worse position. We could be in a position where we have the problem, but no funds to address it. And that's, bluntly, that's usually where we are. And now we are able to solve multiple problems in the state. So I'm not going to say that's going to solve every problem, but at least we have a mechanism so we can start to address this.

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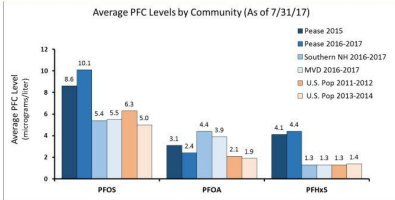
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