

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 11, 2023

The Honorable Michael S. Regan
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator Regan,

We write regarding recent reports of lead-sheathed telephone cables found underground, underwater, and at the surface level across the nation. On July 9, The Wall Street Journal released an investigative report (report) that uncovered a “hidden source of [lead] contamination” in the form of more than 2,000 lead covered cables. Dr. Jack Caravanos, a New York University environmental public-health professor who assisted with the research, told reporters that “A new, uncontrolled source of lead like old telephone cables may partly explain why children continue to have lead in their blood...”¹ We applaud the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for taking action under the *Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act* (CERCLA) to investigate the claims made in the report and the extent to which lead-sheathed cables are impacting the communities highlighted in the report and the commitment to prioritize overburdened areas.

For decades, lead-sheathed cables were placed to enable telecommunications nationwide. When they were no longer in use, they may have been irresponsibly abandoned, potentially contaminating the soil and water. Given the breadth of use and toxicity of lead-sheathed cables, we write in support of the EPA immediately expanding testing and investigations to determine the location and ownership of lead cables across Illinois and the nation.

In Illinois, the persistent presence of lead is a public health disaster that has plagued our communities for decades. According to samples collected from our state’s 1,768 water utilities, more than eight of every ten Illinoisans lives in a community where the toxic metal was found in the tap water.² No amount of lead exposure is safe for children’s physical and mental development.³ Lead exposure can lead to severe developmental delays, weight loss, learning difficulties, and a slew of other health complications. Every zip code within the city of Chicago is considered high risk for lead exposure by the Illinois Department of Public Health, which thus recommends that all children be tested for lead poisoning at one, two, and three years of age.⁴ The discovery of these lead cables as another potential source of lead exposure may help explain the persistently high rates throughout our state. We fully anticipate that telecommunications firms will be helpful and cooperative with the EPA’s efforts to ascertain the exact locations of these cables and provide any other helpful information on this issue.

¹ The Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lead-cables-telecoms-att-toxic-5b34408b>, 2023

² The Chicago Tribune, [Lead found in tap water in towns across Illinois \(chicagotribune.com\)](https://www.chicagotribune.com), 2021

³ NPR, [CDC announces stringent new standards for lead poisoning in children : NPR](https://www.npr.com), 2022


⁴ Illinois Department of Public Health <https://dph.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idph/files/forms/childleadevaluationtestingrecommendations.pdf>, 2022


Despite the decades of science on the harms and the on-going threat of lead, telecommunications firms and others that own these toxic cables have not yet disclosed in full the use and location of these cables, the materials used for their construction, the level of lead that the sites contain, or the status of their removal and contamination remediation. We ask the EPA to provide responses to our following inquiries within 30 days of receiving this letter:


1. Does the EPA have existing information or data on the lifecycle of lead cables? If harmful degradation over time is possible, does the EPA have the relevant information about potential negative impacts on the environment and human health?
2. Does the EPA have the authority to allow for existing federal funding, including through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* and *Inflation Reduction Act*, to be utilized by states and communities to take on environmental sampling and remediation projects related to abandoned lead-sheathed cables?
3. Has the EPA experienced any shortcomings in its existing authority to obtain records of lead cables, along with the details regarding their use, location, the materials used, and any records of repair, removal, or contamination remediation?
4. Does the EPA have a plan to work with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and any other agency of jurisdiction to ensure that the agencies are collecting relevant and timely information on the location and ownership of lead cables? If a plan is in place, please share details of the plan. If a plan is not in place, will such a plan be developed by the EPA, the FCC, and any other agencies?
5. If remediation is determined to be necessary, does the EPA have a plan to work with the FCC and any other agency of jurisdiction to create a remediation plan with a funding mechanism that does not burden taxpayers?
6. Does the EPA intend to incorporate lead-sheathed cables in the Strategy to Reduce Lead Exposures and Disparities? If so, how?
7. Does the EPA plan to make public, in accordance with confidential business information requirements and applicable law, the information gathered in response to the July 26, and any subsequent, inquiry to telecom companies?

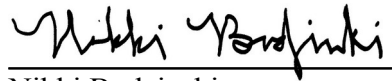
We are dedicated to working with EPA, the Biden Administration, states, and our constituents to eliminate all points of lead exposure. We appreciate the agency's attention to this urgent public health issue, and we look forward to your response.

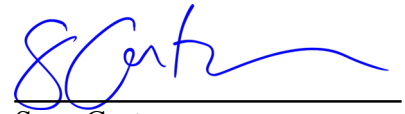
Sincerely,



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Nikki Budzinski
Member of Congress


Sean Casten
Member of Congress


Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress


Bill Foster
Member of Congress


Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress


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