

Feds: Too much fluoride in water

Watsonville moves forward with plans to fluoridate as feds propose lower standard

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WATSONVILLE — New questions are emerging about fluoridation in the wake of a proposal by federal health officials to cut the standard for public drinking water.

The proposal, announced Friday by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, comes as Watsonville, after a bitter decade-long battle, prepares to become the first city in Santa Cruz County to fluoridate its water.

Federal health officials are proposing to nearly halve the maximum level in response to a recent study that found two in five adolescents have teeth that are mottled or streaked due to excessive fluoride intake, a mainly cosmetic condition known as fluorosis.

"Like anything else, you can have too much of a good thing," said Dr. Howard Pollick, a professor at the UC San Francisco dental school and a spokesman for the American Dental Association.

According to an analysis by federal health officials, changes in the consumption of water and other beverages produced with fluoridated water, as well as the wide availability of fluoride in toothpaste and other dental products, have led to a greater percentage of children suffer-

FLUORIDE

Continued from A1

ing from fluorosis.

Nick Bulaich, who spearheaded a 2002 initiative to ban fluoride from Watsonville's water supply, said officials are finally acknowledging what he and other foes have argued for years. There's no way to control the dosage.

"You're getting it everywhere," Bulaich said. "It's in your entire food chain. It's in your Coca-Cola processed with fluoridated water. It's in your food processed with fluoridated water."

But federal health officials aren't backing off their support for fluoridation, which has resulted in a dramatic

drop in dental disease in the past 60 years and is considered by many to be one of the most important public health advances of the 20th century.

"One of water fluoridation's biggest advantages is that it benefits all residents of a community — at home, work, school or play," Assistant Secretary of Health Harold Koh said in a press release. "Today's announcement is part of our ongoing support of appropriate fluoridation for community water systems, and its effectiveness in preventing tooth decay throughout one's lifetime."

Health officials are proposing to revise the current range of 0.7-1.2 parts per million to 0.7 parts per million.

The current range is based

on climate with the idea that people in warmer areas of the country consume more water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also announced Friday that it is looking at revising downward its standard of 4 parts per million for naturally occurring fluoride in water supplies after a study showed an increased risk for brittle bones and fractures from high and prolonged ingestion of fluoride.

In 2002, Bulaich's anti-fluoride initiative won, but state health officials took the city to court. State law requires cities with 10,000 or more residents to fluoridate if outside funds are available, and in Watsonville's case, the California Dental Association Foundation offered to put up

the money.

The city took its losing legal fight all the way to the California Supreme Court, which refused to hear the case. In September, after years of wrangling over a grant contract, the City Council accepted the foundation's \$1.6 million offer.

Steve Palmisano, city Public Works program manager, called the news "interesting," but said he didn't expect it to affect Watsonville's fluoridation plans, though it might result in some cost savings down the line for materials.

The project is in the design phase, and construction bids are expected to come before the City Council in the summer.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.