

## Transcript

### **On West Gray, Episode 9, Norman's Water Supply w/Chris Mattingly & Nathan Madenwald**

**Runtime: 22 minutes 16 seconds**

Tiffany Vrska 0:15

What's up, everybody? Welcome to On West Gray, the monthly podcast about all things local government in the City of Norman. I'm your host, Tiffany Vrska, Chief Communications Officer for the City and we appreciate you tuning in. Today in the studio we have with us Nathan Madenwald, utilities engineer for the City of Norman and Chris Mattingly, utilities director for the city of Norman, great to be with you guys today. Welcome to the show.

Nathan Madenwald 0:39

Thank you for having us. We're excited to talk about water and the City of Norman.

Tiffany Vrska 0:42

All right, awesome. Well, you hit the nail on the head, we did invite you in today to talk about something really important to our community, our water. As the popular tagline goes, water is life. And there are so many facets to responsibly treating and administering our water for our residents. Very recently, though, I understand that your teams are working to implement new protocols and procedures as they relate to the federal lead and copper revision, or LCRR, set to take effect in 2024. So Nathan, could you tell us a little bit about that?

Nathan Madenwald 1:17

Absolutely, Tiffany. So lead in drinking water is something that's been regulated back since 1986. That's when Congress passed a law limiting or eliminating the use of lead service lines. In 1991, the EPA built upon this by passing the lead and copper rule. Minor revisions to that rule have been made to date. And when we talk about today, its lead and copper rule. But we're going to focus mostly on the lead aspect of that. 2011, there was new modifications to the rule, which further reduced the amount of lead in that pipe. So the original rule allowed up to a percent, went down to less than a quarter of a percent. And then what we're here to talk about today mostly is the new lead and copper rule revision, as was passed in 2021. And it's going to come into effect in 2024. There's a lot of a lot of rules and regulations regarding lead and copper. Really, what does this mean for our customers today? So City of Norman has been in full compliance with the original lead and copper rule. We take periodic samples routinely. Our results show that we've got 97% of our samples that didn't show any level of lead in them. And 99.8% show that we had less than the EPA action level that they've mandated, that was only one sample since 2010. In addition, our water treatment plant staff do a great job, they monitor numerous

water quality parameters to make sure that our water is lightly scaling pipe in our system rather than corroding. That doesn't mean we're sending a bunch of scale is going to fill up your hot water heater. But it's the right balance that they're trying to strike to make sure we're protecting our customers. With these new rules, what everyone is trying to say is no amount of lead in water is safe. There's recent experiences within the United States where people were exposed to high levels of lead, which we can't have that anywhere. So these rules are looking at further protecting our public. And this is something that everyone throughout the country is going to be dealing with, not just the city of Norman, everyone in the state will be. So we're all working together to try to figure out what's the best way to move forward. And with this more specifically, with this new rule, there's going to be several items that come about that are different than what we've done in the past, we're going to change the way that we sample, we're going to be mandated to sample at schools and daycares. We are going to do increased communication with our customers. What people will see us do out in the field a little bit more is we're going to have to develop an inventory of our lead service line system. So water is piped throughout the City through mains, but then it's served to each individual residents by a lead service line. So those lines have a public aspect, which is what the city maintains from the main to the water meter. And then there's the private side, which is a new component that we're going to have to work with with this new rule, which is from the meter to the house. In the past, the city has had no responsibility for that line. And we still don't have it in the future. But now the federal government is requiring us to inventory that as a component of our system as well. So people will see us, we're going to develop a plan to go inventory those lines, which will have some field verification, so people may see us in front yards, exposing lines and determining what those materials are made of.

Tiffany Vrska 4:19

All right, well, that is a lot of information all at once. But we definitely appreciate you breaking that down for us. So again, you said that, you know these cities are working kind of at the same time as these rules are coming down to figure out what next steps are and how you're tackling this. So these regulations come down from the Environmental Protection Agency. Is that correct?

Nathan Madenwald 4:44

Yes, the Environmental Protection Agency is the one who issues the lead and copper rule. And so they're the ones that pass the lead and copper rule revision. Actually, they're working on another rule revision that they're going to implement sometime in the near future called the lead and copper rule improvement. So they liked a lot of the aspects with the revision rule that they want to do even further protections in the improvement rule.

Tiffany Vrska 5:06

Got it. So this is a federal mandate that's coming down that we definitely need to work through and adhere to, to make sure that we're in line with all of the rules and regulations that are keeping our drinking water safe. So you talked about the inventory, you're developing an inventory. And I imagine,

with all of the miles of line in Norman, that's going to be quite the feat. So what does that look like? I mean, do you have a loose timeline on when people might be able to expect that inventory kicking off and maybe different elements that go along with that, as far as notification, the increased communication you mentioned with our customers?

Nathan Madenwald 5:50

Excellent question. Yeah, the inventory component is something that we're going to have to have in place by October of 2024. That will be a public facing inventory meeting, once we start developing that and we're ready to issue that the public will be able to see that and that's a requirement. We're gonna have to submit that inventory to the DEQ, excuse me, the Department of Environmental Quality. Our customers will also be able to see that information as well. So when we're getting ready to do this inventory, we're looking at starting probably within the next six months to 12 months, we're not sure, we're currently trying to determine if we want to do that using in house staff, repurposing them from jobs that they've got to do now, to save costs, or if we wanted to utilize and a third party company to go out and do the exposing of the pipes to determine materials. And then we're also going to focus on communication to our customers. So we've talked a little bit about this rule. So as I said, in 1986, was when we started regulating this, and then when they started banning lead pipe materials. So it's not going to apply to all of our customers the same. And so we want to do kind of focused outreach to our customers to help them understand what they need to do for their specific location. For instance, newer homes most recently built that were after the lead pipe ban, they may not have to do anything. There may not be any protections that they have to implement. But the older homes, we want to communicate with them about what they might be seeing in their neighborhood, and measures that they can do to further protect themselves. As we've said, we've done a lot of routine sampling, where we show that we don't have levels of lead in our system, or if we do they're really, really low levels. But we can help them further protect themselves by different things such as when they're getting ready to use drinking water, they can flush the lines a little bit more so that way they make sure if there is any lead in their system, it gets flushed past, and then they're getting true water from the city distribution system rather than water that sat in contact with the lead line.

Tiffany Vrska 7:45

Got it. And I did hear that you had mentioned you know, prioritizing the schools and daycares. So do we know anything about what that process might look like?

Nathan Madenwald 7:55

No, we've had some some communication with Norman Public Schools. But we haven't reached out with the daycares. But that is something that we're going to begin doing. Or we actually probably do that a little bit later. Because we cannot actually do those samples in advance of the rule or discussions with DEQ, we're going to be required to do that required sampling after the rule has taken effect.

Tiffany Vrska 8:14

Got it. Okay. Um, so at this time, we don't really know how many customers may be impacted, because that'll be part of the inventory process, is that correct to assume?

Nathan Madenwald 8:24

That's correct, we're able to look at our system and look at date of construction as a kind of a high level rule and see about how many, we need to look at how many we truly need to inventory. Unfortunately, that's about half of our system, we have about 40,000 connections. And when we look at that information, it's about half of them that we're going to have to go try to get a better understanding of what they have in the ground, we won't be able to do every one of those, but we want to look at it statistically and try to make sure we're hitting a high enough percentage of them to where we can maybe replicate that based on other homes that were connected to that line based on when that actual water system was built to serve that area, we're going to work to do to deal with that. We will still have some what we would consider unknowns, but it'll be a work in progress. And we'll work to improve it as we go along.

Tiffany Vrska 9:11

Right. And it sounds like you all are being very proactive and trying to work out the logistics of what this plan looks like. And I'll also give a shout out to your staff at the water treatment plant because I know that they always help any customers that may have any sort of concerns about their water at any time, as far as testing goes are sending out staff to attend to concerns and so we know how hard you guys work and we appreciate you catching up on the latest with public utilities. So thank you for the rundown. Nathan, is there anything else that you would like to say about this initiative that an all of the work in front of you involving the lead and copper?

Nathan Madenwald 9:52

No, I think we've covered pretty well thank you so much, Tiffany.

Tiffany Vrska 9:54

Okay. And we also have Chris in here with us and we do keep water on the forefront as we are the only city I think in Oklahoma that has to have voter approval to increase utility rates. And so that's a very big deal for us very important to keep the city running as it should. And so this is just the latest challenge and making sure that we have quality and safe water here in Norman. And, Chris, could you speak to other measures that we hope to continue providing, as far as maintaining high quality water and service in your department, I know that we are prepping for another election pretty soon.

Chris Mattingly 10:30

Yes, we are. As you know, the last election, we covered three topics. We were trying to pass that rate to get disinfection, AMI, and then just repair more pipelines that are bursting across our town.

Tiffany Vrska 10:43

And AMI, remind folks that maybe...

Chris Mattingly 10:45

Advanced Metering Infrastructure. That's like an automated meter reading system. And so on the disinfection since we were unable to pass that vote that left us with, we are still out of compliance in that category with DEQs rules. We are trying to do some kind of makeshift chlorination in a few of the wells in a good effort, a good faith effort. But as we you know, realize we really need a disinfection plant to really do the do it correctly. AMI, we're able to get a grant for \$2 million. And so we weren't planning on doing AMI project. But with government offering offering \$2 million for that project, we had to seize that. So we took a loan for \$15 million. And we will be able to get that \$2 million grant and use that to automate our meter reading capabilities.

Tiffany Vrska 11:36

And just real quick, I mean, some of the benefits of AMI, right? Increased accuracy and efficiency, you don't have, you know, personnel going out to read every single meter, you know, it automates that, could you talk a little bit to that?

Chris Mattingly 11:51

Yes, it'll, it'll eliminate our estimating. And then the good thing too is it'll help us track some of our lost water, we're currently making 5 billion gallons of water per year. And we only can account for 4 billion. So a lot of our old meters were past their their life expectancy, they're supposed to replace like every 20 years. And a lot of them are way past their lifespan. So we're we don't know where a lot of our water is going. So these new meters and the new capability will really help us identify where some of our last water is.

Tiffany Vrska 11:52

Right. And I love the idea of, you know, if you have maybe a leak at your house, and you don't know where this waste, wasted water is going, it can kind of pinpoint for you with this new technology. You know, it's it's happening from two to 4pm every day, well, what are you doing different during that time, right, so I assist the customer greatly and trying to solve some of those problems.

Chris Mattingly 12:43

That's right, our customer service team will be able to look more detailed into your water usage, versus before, we would just have a person come by every 30 days, sometimes every 60 days and read the meter. So we really didn't know what happened in the last 30 or 60 days. But these meters will be able to give us a real time, you know, within our accuracy of a past hour. So if you call and had a unusual bill or usage pattern, you could call and talk to one of our customer representatives, and they'll talk you through your bill and they could actually look to see maybe you left the hose on at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. Or you we could see maybe you fill the pool a couple of weeks ago or and helped him identify where that water possibly went.

Tiffany Vrska 13:25

I love that. Sorry, I had to just interrupt you there.

Chris Mattingly 13:29

And then, so as far as our new rate increases, some people were saying what's changed? You know, it seems like I think our finance director use the word dire. And there are it continues to get a little more dire as because our revenues are staying flat. And as long as we don't increase rates, we have flat revenues. But at the same time our expenditures are increasing. As everyone knows electricity, chemicals, all the products are going up with inflation. And we've seen at our treatment plans an increase in electric cost of 50%. So that's \$500,000 is what we're seeing an increase in electricity per year. That's a big number. The other thing is chemical costs. We saw a 25% increase last spring, we're anticipating a 10% This spring, that's another \$200,000. These are big numbers. Again, as we're trying to find more money to replace more pipes and do things that were tasked to do these expenses continue to go up and take out our ability to have money to fund these projects. I think it's worth noting, we've programmed with this lead and copper rule, over \$3 million to do projects in an effort to meet these new guidelines. Some of that money coming through the State Revolving Fund, we would be able to if we could get another loan, we would have the ability to get a 30% off of the principal through additional loans, but our debt coverage right now is so tight, because we don't have enough money coming in the fund, we're unable to really take any additional loans from the State Revolving Fund at this time.

Tiffany Vrska 15:07

So that's what our finance director was talking about recently with Council. Is that correct?

Chris Mattingly 15:12

Yes. So with that, you know, not having that ability to go take a loan, we're not going to be able to get some of that 30% grant funding that's coming in through the federal government, we're going to miss

those opportunities. And then I must add, there's another rule coming from EPA, and it's in its final stages for chromium six. And that's another thing that's happened since our last rate election. We were planning that \$17 million disinfection plant, and we sized it so it will have the future of treatment capacity. But now that chromium six rule is coming quicker than we realized. And some of the information we're receiving shows that those limits could take it from, currently we're at 100 parts per billion and it's looking like the new limits might get as low as one part per billion or less. We still have to wait for the final paperwork from EPA of what those rules are going to exactly look like. And they'll probably give us five years to implement that. But we're programming in our capital projects budget, another \$130 million. And what that would do is that'll just allow us to keep our wellfield, which is currently about 30% of our water supply. And so very important issues. And again, we're going to need funding to address these issues. And that's the reason we're really going to come after you know, another rate increase and try to explain, do a better job explaining to our customers of the need and why we need to do this to protect a good water system, and keep it a good viable thing for our city.

Tiffany Vrska 16:41

Sure. And, you know, speaking of the education and outreach, I know that with the contractor you guys work with and all of the presentations you've given, I think it's really helpful to compare to sister and peer cities as far as rates, and we're still very competitive, as far as you know, the cost of living and our utility rates, even if we were to have an increase. And so as a person that also lives in Norman, in addition to working for the city, I think that that's really helpful to illustrate that for people. So I've always really appreciated that. So on top of making sure that you have funding to buy the chemicals at the water treatment plan and fix the broken water lines, you have these other mandates that are coming down, these federal mandates. So you, you do have a lot that you are going to be needing to pay for in your department, Chris. And so we will be on the lookout then for for more public information as it relates to an upcoming election. And do we have a timeframe for that yet?

Chris Mattingly 17:47

We're kind of looking for June of this year, so I can get everything ready. Hopefully we'll have a bring a ballot in June for the customers.

Tiffany Vrska 17:56

Right. And I know that there's other deadlines with the elections that you have to meet to make sure that you give the election board notice and that sort of thing. And so folks might even hear initial chatter about that, I think in the spring, so. Okay, well, is there anything else, Chris or Nathan, that you would like to share about utilities business at this time?

Chris Mattingly 18:17

Yeah, I would like to add one more is that some of the pipes I didn't really the pipe repairs that are needed across town? It was just, I think two Fridays ago, I think we're going to see continued frequency of this happening, Friday evening, five o'clock PM, we had a 12 inch ductile iron line bust. And it put Taco Bell out of service, Steel Gym, the Wings Stop, IHOP. And those businesses looked at us and said, Hey, when's my water gonna be back on this is Friday night, Friday evening, my prime business. And we're like, we're very sorry. But this is a large 12 inch waterline that has just burst. Our crews have to get an Okie spot, we have to show up and try to repair this. And we'll do it as fast as we can. And they were able to repair that one in about a three to four hour timeframe, which wasn't terrible. But it's disruptive to the businesses. It wasn't a planned shutdown. So no one was prepared for that. And these and then the other thing on top of that is all we did is we went in and put in a repair clamp. So we didn't replace the line or make it better. All we did is we stopped it from leaking at this time. And we put it on our capital projects inventory, that that's a line we need to address very soon. But we have more and more of those adding up on our list, but yet not enough funds to actually go out and start replacing them.

Tiffany Vrska 19:39

Right. And I know every situation is different. Do you have any kind of ballpark estimation on what it might cost to replace that type of line? Or is there any kind of like, standard cost estimate to give people an idea of just how expensive that can be?

Chris Mattingly 19:54

We did give estimates last time and it was it was plus 300 million, over three 300 million for our city. And I'm afraid, Nathan, you want to chime in? But the costs have gone up since that and that estimate, and what are the what do you think now? Probably?

Nathan Madenwald 20:09

I think that's pretty close, I mean, for 600 miles of water line in our distribution system, and about half of that is ductile iron line or old line that we will need to replace and the cost for the that is over a million dollars a mile now.

Tiffany Vrska 20:25

A million dollars a mile? Okay, yeah. And you kind of sometimes it's so easy to take, you know, you turn on your faucet, you have water coming out, you're able to flush the toilet, you're able to do these things and you don't see these pipes that are underground. It's excellence unseen, if you will, you know, so it's easy to take it for granted. But it's so important that we maintain and take care of that infrastructure.



Well, thank you for sharing that with us guys. Is there anything else that we needed to make sure our listeners are aware of right now?

Chris Mattingly 20:58

No. Thank you for having us.

Tiffany Vrska 20:59

Okay. Well, thanks for joining us. Folks that have further questions or concerns related to water quality, or the LCRR that we talked about today can reach out to staff at the Vernon Campbell water treatment plant at 405-321-2182. We'll also have some more public information regarding these concerns and matters as we move forward in the process and in all of the inventory at [NormanOK.gov](http://NormanOK.gov). So again, Nathan, Chris, we appreciate your time on the show. Listeners can sign up for email notifications, traffic advisories and press releases from the City of Norman at [NormanOK.gov/Norman-news](http://NormanOK.gov/Norman-news). Questions or commentary about On West Gray can be sent into [PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov](mailto:PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov). Shoutouts to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the City of Norman communications office. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for tuning in to On West gray.

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