

STATE

State budget includes 'first step' toward testing private wells for contaminants

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BOSTON — Included in the fiscal 2025 budget signed into law Monday by Gov. Maura Healey is \$100,000 allotted to the state Department of Environmental Protection to create a study to determine how best to test private wells for contaminants.

The study would determine how to test the 200,000 private wells in the state that serve more than a half-million residents. Most are located in Central and Western Massachusetts, but communities on Cape Cod and the islands also rely on well water, drawn from shallow aquifers that can be contaminated by fertilizers and septic systems.

These need to be tested for contaminants ranging from heavy metals to PFAS, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which have been linked to cancer, advocates said.

“This is an important first step,” said Amie Shei, president and CEO of the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, which supports legislation that would require the state to oversee the cleanliness of the water supply.

“Safe drinking water is something many of us take granted, yet the reality is that nearly half a million Massachusetts residents rely on unregulated drinking water from private wells that could be contaminated and potentially cause negative health impacts,” Shei said. “This funding is an important investment toward ensuring that all Massachusetts residents have access to safe drinking water regardless of where they live.”

Legislation filed in the session that ended Wednesday proposed requiring testing of private wells on real estate transfers as well as creating a fund to help homeowners remediate well contamination. Legislators are being urged to continue to file the measures in the coming session next year.

The funding for the study was added to the budget by Sen. Jamie Eldridge, D-

Marlborough, and Reps. Meghan Kilcoyne, D-Clinton, Smitty Pignatelli, D-Lenox, and Dan Sena, D-Acton.

"I look forward to the results of the DEP study to help ensure residents who rely on private wells have safe drinking water, free from PFAS and other harmful chemicals, while also being mindful of the potentially high cost of well water remediation," Sen. Becca Rausch, D-Needham and chair of the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, said in a written statement.

The funding gives the state DEP resources to chart a path on how to proceed with testing the private wells by the start of the new year. Currently, municipal health departments oversee private wells, and the state regulates well drillers. While the state offers guidelines on digging private wells, there are no substantive guidelines on water quality and testing.

Currently, 93% of Massachusetts residents drink from public water suppliers, many of them accessing water from the Quabbin Reservoir.

From 2020 to 2022, the Private Well Program to Protect Public Health, which received \$1.5 million in funding from the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, tested 502 private wells across the state and found that 32% had levels of contaminants that exceeded state health standards.