

\$48.7M to LI for drinking water

State grants go to suppliers to fight contaminants

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Long Island water providers will receive \$48.7 million in state grants to treat several contaminants in drinking water, a move that suppliers say will not only help clean the water but lessen the costs to ratepayers of these projects.

The state grants, announced Friday, will benefit nine Island water providers addressing three “emerging contaminants” — 1,4-dioxane, perfluorooctane sulfonic acid, or PFOS, and perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA. They are referred to as “forever chemicals” because they break down slowly in water and soil, and accumulate and persist in the human body.

“It’s unbelievably welcome news,” said Dennis Kelleher, chairman of the public relations committee for the Long Island Water Conference, a trade group of local water suppliers. “We’ve been fighting a battle to remove these contaminants for some time. This will help keep the costs down.”

More than two years have passed since New York implemented limits on the three pollutants, which are the result of decades of industrial, commercial, agricultural and residential contaminants.

Long Island suppliers say that, despite the presence of these hazardous chemicals in certain wells, they are providing safe drinking water. But local advocates say these chemicals are damaging, and there is an urgency to scrub them from the drinking water.

Cheers for funding

“This funding will help prevent serious health issues,” said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Farmingdale.

Long Island has some 50



Water providers say the grants will help cut costs for ratepayers.

public water providers and all depend on water from underground aquifers. Many have been building systems to treat the contaminants. These water treatment projects mark one of the most expensive and labor-intensive infrastructure undertakings on Long Island, with total costs expected to exceed \$1.5 billion, according to the water conference.

Water suppliers say they expect water bills will increase due to the work, though the state money will help lessen the impact. Current costs only include building the treatment systems; operating them also will be expensive.

The projects in the latest funding include \$8.1 million to enhance treatment at two wells in the Town of Hempstead, which were so polluted with these emerging contaminants, they had to be shut down recently, state officials said.

The Island funding is part of nearly \$300 million in state grants for water infrastructure improvements announced Friday. Island water providers also received \$250 million in similar water grants in April.

The Suffolk County Water Authority, the largest Island water provider serving 1.2 million residents, will get a total of \$5.98 million for systems to treat 1,4-dioxane in wells, as well as extend its service to Southampton, the state said.

Testing has found 1,4-dioxane — an industrial chemical in paint strippers, dyes and some deodorants and shampoos — in more than 70% of public water wells on Long Island. Long-term exposure has

been linked to kidney and liver damage and cancer, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Other sites helped

The new funding also provides \$5 million to treat a Carle Place well containing 1,4-dioxane; \$6.8 million for a Jericho water well containing 1,4 dioxane and PFOA; \$5 million for a Mineola well with emerging contaminants; and \$6.4 million for two Plainview water plants with emerging contaminants; \$5 million to treat contaminants in two Port Washington wells; and \$5 million for treatment at two Westbury wells, the state said.

Plainview Water District chairman Marc Laykind said in a statement: “This funding will allow us to keep investing in our treatment facilities that provide high quality drinking water to the Plainview-Old Bethpage community without the monetary burden falling on our residents’ shoulders.”

PFOS and PFOA — chemicals used in nonstick and stain-resistant materials and firefighting foam — have been found in hundreds of public and private wells on the Island. Exposure to PFOS or PFOA can damage the immune system, the cardiovascular system, human development and can cause cancer, the EPA said.

Gov. Kathy Hochul said the grants represent the state’s commitment to providing clean water. “We are proud to support municipalities with a historic level of funding for water infrastructure improvements,” she said.

KEEPING THE

Copiague using NY-sourced food in new program

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY JOIE TYRRELL
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The lunch menu on a recent Thursday at Walter G. O’Connell High School in Copiague featured broccoli grown on a Suffolk County farm, milk from the Hudson Valley and meatballs from upstate New York.

The servings were part of “NY Thursdays,” an offering of food grown and produced across the state and placed on students’ lunch trays to enhance nutrition and support local farms. Copiague is among the first districts on Long Island working to become part of a program run by the state Department of Agriculture and Markets called the “30% NYS Initiative,” in which systems receive extra funding for lunch if they spend 30% of their food budgets on New York products.

NYS Initiative is part of several efforts across Long Island and statewide to get more fresh food into school cafeterias. Copiague launched its program last month.

Earlier this month, Gov. Kathy Hochul announced \$12 million in federal funding for schools to purchase regionally produced foods and beverages. Meanwhile, some districts across the Island have partnered with local growers to boost “Farm-to-School” efforts.

Walter G. O’Connell High senior Alice Fartushynska, 16, who eats lunch in the cafeteria daily, said this school year “has been great. The food has gotten much better. It tastes better.”

Academic benefits

Educators have said access to nutritional food can help children succeed academically. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed districts nationwide to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of their parents’ income.



MaryAnne Metzka, Copiague director of cafeteria services, supports the program.

WHAT TO KNOW

- Copiague is among the first school districts working to be part of a program run by the state Department of Agriculture and Markets called the “30% NYS Initiative,” in which school systems receive extra funding for lunch if they spend 30% of their food budgets on New York products.

- To incentivize school districts to use more New York State farm products, the initiative increases the reimbursement schools receive for lunches from 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal for any district that purchases at least 30% of the ingredients for its lunch program from New York-sourced food products.

- Educators have said that access to nutritional food in schools can help children succeed academically.

Before the pandemic, families had to be below certain income levels for their children to qualify. The program ended this school year.

Some school systems, includ-

SCHOOL LUNCH CLOSE TO HOME



Regina Vazquez serves lunch made from local farm food at Copiague High School on Oct. 20. ■ Video: [newsday.com/copiague](https://www.newsday.com/copiague)

ing in Copiague, still qualify to serve free meals due to a high poverty level in the community. School officials said that was one reason they sought to join NYS Initiative this year.

“The financial benefit that we get more for every lunch that we serve is important, but the fact that it is much more appealing to the kids . . . and that it is locally sourced is also important,” Copiague Superintendent Kathleen Bannon said. “In this district, we have a tremendous amount of food insecurity. We have to ensure that students have balanced food when they are here.”

School food services are self-sustaining, but districts receive reimbursements from federal and state governments to cover some costs.

To incentivize districts to

use more New York farm products, NYS Initiative increases the state reimbursement for lunches from 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal for any district that purchases at least 30% of ingredients from products such as farm-fresh produce and locally raised meats. Introduced during the 2018-19 school year as part of No Student Goes Hungry legislation, there are now more than 60 districts participating, said Cheryl Bilinski, Local Food Systems specialist and the Farm-to-School lead for Cornell Cooperative Extension Harvest NY. With funding from the NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets, the organization provides training and technical assistance to farms and school systems.

Since inception, there has been \$10 million earmarked an-

nually in the budget to support the program, Bilinski said.

Upstate districts have been more successful in the program due to several factors, including access to local producers and dairy products. Despite strong interest and commitment, participation by Long Island districts has been stymied by a lack of access to New York milk, Bilinski said.

No reimbursement yet

No Long Island schools have yet received reimbursement through NYS Initiative, according to the state Department of Agriculture and Markets, but there are several efforts to increase access to state-produced milk, which will help them reach the program's threshold. Copiague has been able to procure local milk and dairy products this school year, officials

there said.

School systems track New York items throughout the year and then submit an application to the state for reimbursement the following school year.

There are about 15 Long Island districts purchasing local foods, and a handful of those systems are planning to apply to NYS Initiative this school year, according to Amy Bly, regional Farm-to-School coordinator for the Long Island Region Cornell Cooperative Extension Harvest NY.

“Copiague . . . may in fact be one of the first Long Island schools to apply and qualify for the 30% NYS Initiative,” Bly said.

“It’s really a win-win for everyone. As well as connecting the children with more local, fresh, nutrient-dense foods . . . we’re also decreasing the car-

bon footprint” by trucking food from Suffolk farms to local schools, she said.

In Copiague, some dairy items are being offered daily, such as milk, yogurt and cheese sticks, said MaryAnne Metzack, the district’s director of cafeteria services. The district enrolls roughly 4,700 students in grades K-12.

“On Thursdays, we have different dishes that feature New York-sourced pasta, beef, chicken, fruits and vegetables,” Metzack said. “When it’s picked a couple of weeks ago and then shipped directly to us, it’s the freshest possible item that you could get. But it’s also helping our local communities.”

Ties to other program

The NYS Initiative is related to another nutrition program called “Farm-to-School.” Several Island districts, including Southampton, Bridgehampton, Tuckahoe, North Shore and Brentwood, have participated in that program, Bly said.

The Department of Agriculture and Markets has reported that nearly \$450,000 has been awarded to schools on Long Island since 2016 through the state’s Farm-to-School grant program.

In Southampton, the district has used grant funding to hire a Farm-to-School coordinator, train chefs and purchase equipment to make more meals from scratch using local ingredients, said Regan G. Kiembock, Southampton’s director of Food Services. The district is part of the East End Farm-to-School project, which includes schools in Tuckahoe and Bridgehampton and just recently, Riverhead and Westhampton.

The Southampton district is working on getting milk deliveries to qualify for NYS Initiative.

“At Southampton, we are surrounded by farms and have always had many local farmers that we purchase local foods from,” Kiembock said.

Adam Halsey, who has a farm in Water Mill, has helped the Southampton district with its school garden and supplies fresh produce for meals.

“It’s been a very good relationship, and I think it is important that the local farmers are being supported by the local school district,” Halsey said.

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