Lead Cables 66,000 miles overhead or underwater

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Contamination, Drinking water, Health hazards, Health policy, Regulation, Risk assessment, Risk evaluation

WRITTEN BY

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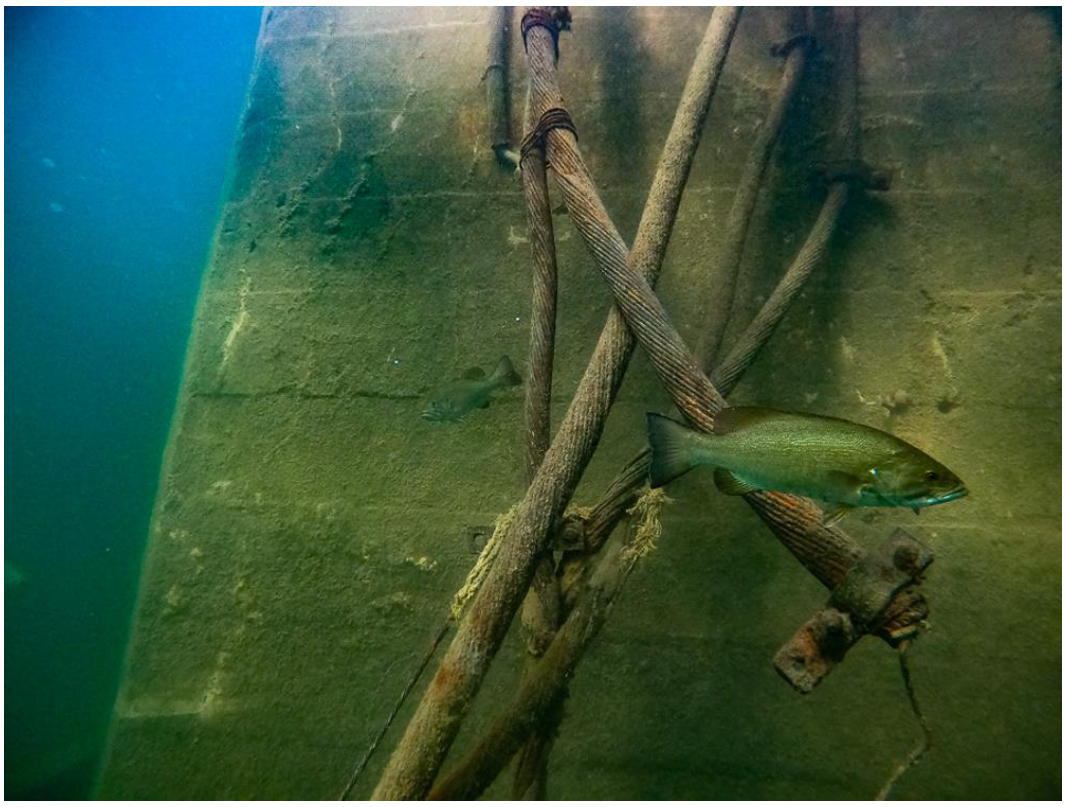


Abandoned telecom cable leaching lead into Idaho fishing waters Photo: Monique Rydel-Fortner

What's New?

A blockbuster ***Wall Street Journal*** (WSJ) investigation showed that lead-sheathed telecom cables are releasing toxic lead into water or surface soil. We are aware of more than 2,000 of these cables across the nation—and more than 300 of those pose a threat to community drinking water sources.

Recognizing the potential risks to public health, EDF, Clean Water Action, and Below the Blue asked EPA on July 17 to investigate potential harms and replace abandoned lead cables strung between telephone poles, as well as any that are accessible to children.

In response, AT&T reported that it has more than 66,000 miles of lead cables, most of which are the overhead type, with the balance running underwater. This is a stunning amount – enough to circle the earth 2.5 times!

Legislators are already demanding that telecom firms act, and EPA and the Department of Justice say they are reviewing the issue. In addition, New York Governor Kathy Hochul directed three key state agencies to investigate the risks. In response, the agencies sent letters to 246 telecom providers requesting their inventory of lead cables. I also appeared on CNBC's Squawk Box to explain the situation, EDF's role in the investigation, and the cables' potential risks.

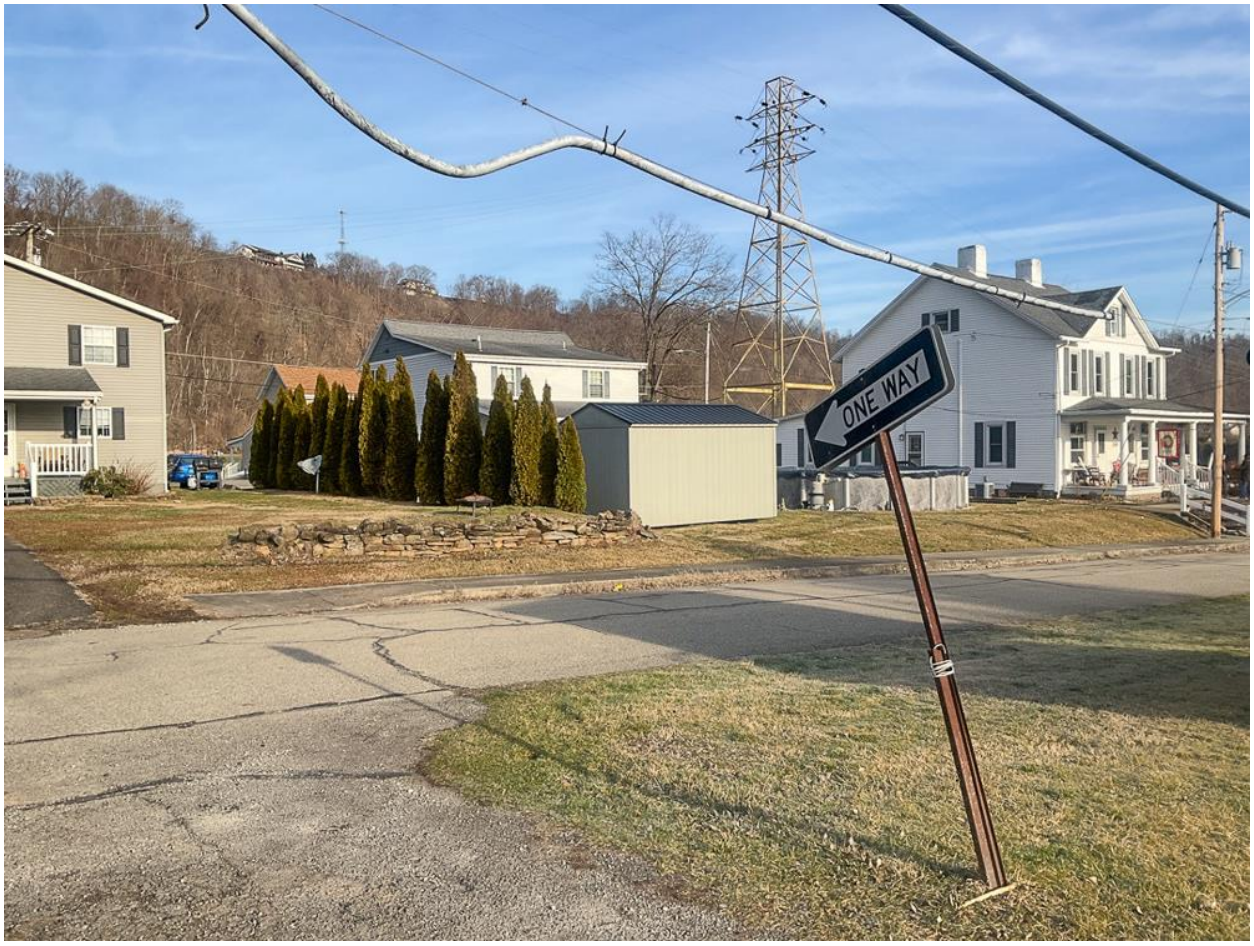
Why It Matters

Health experts have long been aware of the hazards of lead-based paint and lead service lines, but the WSJ investigation surfaced an additional source of widespread lead contamination that was previously unknown: lead telecom cables installed between the 1880s and 1960s.

These cables consist of lead pipes with a bundle of copper wires inside and asphalt coating on the outside. For underwater uses, the lead pipes were wrapped in steel cables. Many of these cables were abandoned in place by the telecom companies when they failed or became unnecessary.

Submarine telecom cable

showing lead pipe filled with copper wires Photo: Monique Rydel-Fortner



Lead cable sags between utility poles in Pennsylvania neighborhood Photo: Monique Rydel-Fortner

The WSJ investigation documented that the cables are releasing lead into the environment. However, the risk posed by the releases and the full extent of the problem is unknown.

We expect that as the cables continue to deteriorate further and release lead into the environment, the risk will increase. The combined risk is likely lower than that posed by more familiar sources of lead exposure (paint and drinking water pipes), where Congress has already recognized the issue and invested billions in cleaning up this legacy. But the risk from lead cables appears to be significant, especially because there is no safe level of exposure to lead.

EDF's role in the WSJ investigation

Last year, WSJ reached out to EDF and described federal litigation over six miles of lead cables found abandoned on the bottom of Lake Tahoe. We were initially skeptical of the scope of the issue and reached out to Below the Blue, the community-based organization that brought the existence of the cables in Lake Tahoe to light. We talked with that organization's cofounders and learned they also work at Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd. (MTS), an environmental consulting firm with over 40 years of expertise specializing in underwater sampling work that involves diving.

Recognizing the potential significance of the issue, EDF agreed to provide guidance, assistance, and funding to MTS to help WSJ identify cables and conduct sampling. MTS and EDF developed a sampling protocol to look for lead releases to the environment where they were most likely to be found – near the lead cable. It is standard scientific protocol to screen for a problem in order to determine whether a full risk assessment is needed and, if so, how best to conduct it. WSJ selected the labs and paid for the lab analysis.

As with all sampling for all pollutants, our hope is that we would *not* find lead contamination that threatens the health of children or the general public. But if releases were found – as they were here – EDF is committed to making the findings public and seeking an independent investigation to assess the risks.

Next Steps

In our letter to EPA, we asked the agency to prioritize the immediate removal of lead cables accessible to children or strung overhead between telephone poles because they pose the greatest risks for exposure to lead, and they can be easily fixed. If the cables are still in service, they should be encapsulated and labeled, taken out of service as soon as possible, and then removed. EPA should also ensure surface soil contaminated by these cables is removed or permanently covered.

For the underwater cables, the situation is more complicated, because disturbing the lead cables may release contaminated sediment into the water. We asked EPA to assess the condition of the underwater cables to determine their condition, their current and anticipated releases to the environment, and the risks posed by their removal or leaving them in place. EPA should use these assessments to ensure action is taken to protect public health—prioritizing cables located in source water protection areas.

We recognize that EPA has many competing priorities and limited resources. The agency should look to the two telecom companies that are responsible for installing or managing the vast majority of the lead-sheathed cables to support the assessment and actions needed to protect the public from potential exposure. We plan to check-in with the agency in a month to understand what it plans to do.
