



# EPA Head Says Drinking Water a Larger Threat Than Climate Change

Cecelia Smith-Schoenwalder • March 20, 2019, at 6:05 p.m.

The head of the agency tasked with protecting public health and the environment said Wednesday that he believes unsafe drinking water is a bigger threat than climate change.

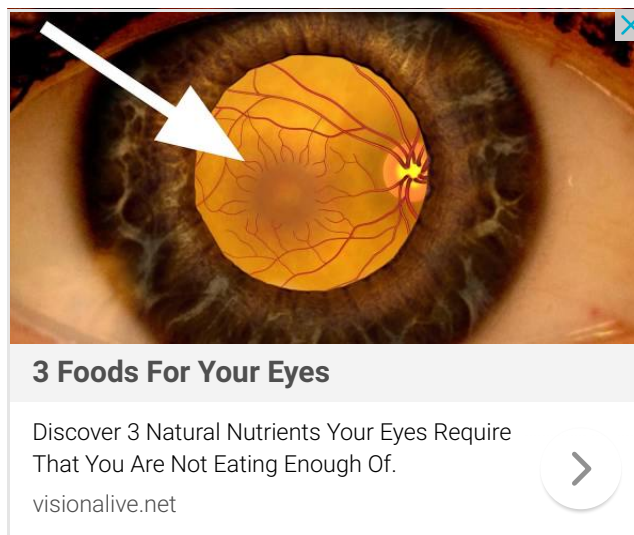
Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler told CBS News in an [interview](#) that aired Wednesday morning that "most of the threats from climate change are 50 to 75 years out," but people are dying from contaminated drinking water now.

Following up on his interview, Wheeler continued talking about global water issues at a speech in Washington, D.C., ahead of the U.N.-sanctioned World Water Day on Friday: "Right now, up to 2 1/2 billion people around the world lack access to safe drinking water, and, as a result, proper sanitation. This fact leads to anywhere from one to three million deaths every year," he said.

"There will be some who say this all stems from climate change," Wheeler continued. "But the truth is that water challenges have been around for generations and are causing immediate deaths annually."

Some climate change experts were quick to disagree with the priorities as Wheeler outlined them.

EPA should look into how events like hurricanes and sea-level rise degrade water quality in the U.S. before it addresses the feasibility of improving water quality worldwide, said Dominique Bachelet, a professor in Oregon State University's Department of Biological and Ecological Engineering.



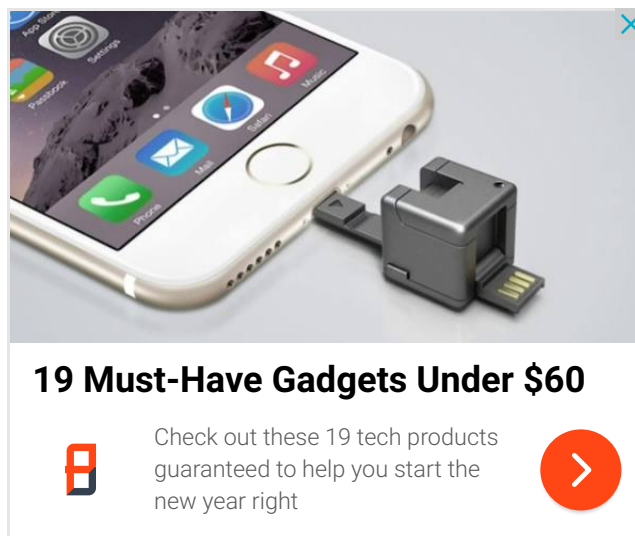
"It is not time to put one's head in the sand" and ignore how the world is changing,

Bachelet said.

Natural disasters like hurricanes, wildfires and flooding are all happening right now and are exacerbated by climate change, said Juan Declet-Barreto, a climate scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists.

"Those are not a half century out," he said. "They're right here."

By putting his focus solely on clean drinking water, Wheeler is kicking the problem of climate change down the road, Declet-Barreto said. He criticized the agency's work on clean drinking water, saying many communities in the U.S. are struggling to access to clean water.

An advertisement featuring a white smartphone with a black USB-C to USB-A adapter and a black USB-C to USB-A adapter. The smartphone screen shows various app icons like Phone, Messages, Maps, and Music. Below the image is a white box with the text "19 Must-Have Gadgets Under \$60" in bold black font. To the left of the text is a small red and blue icon, and to the right is a red circle with a white right-pointing arrow. The text below the title reads "Check out these 19 tech products guaranteed to help you start the new year right".

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"He is feigning concern for the very real water quality issues that affect people all over the world," Declet-Barreto said.

Wheeler, a former lobbyist for the coal industry, addressed in the interview the recent drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, where measures to cut costs led to drinking water contaminated with lead. He said the water now meets EPA standards.

"First of all, I want to make sure the American public understands 92 percent of the water every day meets all the EPA requirements for safe drinking water," he said.

Dennis Lettenmaier, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles Geography

Department, said he partially agrees with Wheeler's statements on drinking water.

Despite agreeing that contaminated drinking water is a "now" problem, Lettenmaier said it should not prevent work on climate change. The two issues go hand-in-hand, he said.

Climate change "provides an additional stress on our ability to provide safe drinking water," Lettenmaier said over email.

Water issues influenced by climate change include reduced streamflow and higher contamination rates for surface water, Lettenmaier said. Surface water, which includes rivers, streams, lakes and reservoirs, made up nearly 80 percent of all the water used in the U.S. in 2015, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Postponing dealing with climate change, which Wheeler's message seems to imply, "isn't a very sensible option," Lettenmaier said.

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