Microplastics in Water/Assessing the State of the Science: American Water Works Association/NACWA Report



Walter Wright, Jr.
wwright@mwlaw.com
(501) 688.8839

11/19/2026

The American Water Works Association and the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (Collectively, ("AWWA") have jointly prepared and released a report titled:

Microplastics in Water: Assessing the State of the Science ("Report").

The Report is stated to have been prepared by ARCADIS with support from additional microplastics subject matter experts at the University of Toronto

Microplastics are generally defined as plastic debris less than 5mm in length.

Concerns have been expressed that they:

- Are ubiquitous in the environment.
- Can pose harm because of exposure to a wide range of species living in diverse habitats.
- Can be ingested by humans through drinking water, air, and food.
- Are regularly released into wastewater treatment plants as they are released from clothing from the wash cycle.

The stated purpose of the Report is to:

… document the current state of microplastics science in the context of water supplies, identifying and prioritizing key research needs to help direct funding to the areas most impactful for understanding risk.

Further, the Report states that with the identified knowledge gaps sufficiently addressed:

… the research findings can appropriately inform public policy and regulatory determinations.

State-of-the-science summaries were developed for microplastics in water supplies relative to each of seven topics:

1. Occurrence;
2. Sampling;
3. Analysis;
4. Treatment;
5. Source control;
6. Health effects;

7. Environmental impact.

In relation to the referenced summaries, the Report identifies the following key points particularly applicable to water utilities:

- Highest priority topic areas for research funding were determined to be health effects and analytical methods.
- These priorities align with the objectives of the Systematic Targeting of Microplastics (STOMP) initiative, launched in April 2026 and funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services
- Given the challenges of detection and the greatest potential to cause adverse health effects, a focus on nanoplastics (i.e., 1 - 1,000 nm in size) is critical for every research topic area.
- Reducing analysis time and associated costs are essential for enabling affordable water quality monitoring, particularly given the number of samples necessary to capture anticipated microplastics variability.
- A substantial investment in research funding is necessary prior to any comprehensive nationwide utility monitoring program in order to ensure accurate and fully representative data.

A copy of the Report can be found here.