PETOSKEY — It’s been two years since Michigan launched a multi-agency effort to respond to rising concerns over per- and polyfluoroalkyls (PFAS) in state water sources, and one year since that agency finished its wide-reaching effort to test public water supplies for the chemicals.

Those tests, conducted by the Michigan PFAS Action Response Team (MPART) found no major evidence of contamination in Emmet, Charlevoix, Otsego or Cheboygan counties — at least, none which reached actionable levels set by state criteria and federal guidelines. And while that dataset could suggest there’s no indication of a PFAS problem in the region so far, its scope is limited in several ways — not least of which being that it does not include private wells or surface water, accounting for at least half of Michigan’s population. Figures from the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) place the number of Michiganders served by private wells at 2.6 million, compared to 1.7 million on public water supplies.

In many instances, that’s when it comes down to private individuals or third parties to fill in the gaps of regional PFAS science.
Since testing on public wells wrapped up last year, EGLE has made some strides when it comes to testing non-public sources of water, but in many cases, it's up to homeowners on private wells to take the initiative.

The agency opened the state's testing lab in Lansing to begin accepting samples from private wells at the end of September, but EGLE won't send anyone to the site to collect the sample. "The cost is $290 for the analysis of one drinking water sample," Scott Dean, spokesman for the agency said in an email to the News-Review. "This cost includes the analysis of all required Quality Control (QC) samples. Test kits are available for order or pickup; test kits contain sample bottles, nitrile gloves, ice packs, cooler, necessary forms, instructions, a return shipping container and box, and a return overnight UPS shipping label."

There are private firms that do offer on-site testing, although not necessarily with the certification that comes with a state test. "There are a couple of different ways people can test their own waters. (A company called) Freshwater Futures has a test locally that they can do at low cost. ... As a screening tool, it can rule out the potential for PFAS. If there is any measurable result, they can go further than that (and reach out to the state)." Other water sources

MPART has also followed its 2018 testing initiative with a test this year of about 750 non-municipal water sources throughout the state including industries, offices, camps and medical facilities. Those tests,

Some, including government agencies, have suggested even the PFOS and PFOA limits should be decreased. According to a study conducted by the Federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry released in 2018, the limits should fall closer to 7 ppt for PFOS and 11 ppt for PFOA. That study also proposed "minimal risk levels" for two other types, PFHxS and PFNA.

While there has been little movement on the federal level when it comes to examining those levels, EGLE is in the process of approving rules that would set maximum contamination levels for seven types of PFAS. Those rules could be finalized next spring.

Testing on private wells

Testing surface water
concentrations, and so based upon these results, it does not appear that PFAS presents a primary threat to surface water in Emmet and Charlevoix county,” said Jennifer McKay, of Tip of the Mitt.

Those are well below the EPA standards, and in almost every case, were also lower than the more stringent rules being pursued by the state. The highest concentration was found in one spring sample from Walloon Lake, at 26 ppt, but it was a type of PFAS which currently has no surface water quality standard in the state.

McKay said these results seem to suggest that there is little evidence that there is a PFAS problem in the area — at least when it comes to surface water, and she added that it was not surprising that some minimal levels of the chemicals were found in most of the samples because of the vast amount of industrial and commercial products PFAS are used in. But she also noted that this was just a preliminary analysis.

“Our understanding of PFAS and its possible threats will continue to improve as more gaps in the data get filled in.”

The results of the study were published last month in a report on the Watershed Council website, and McKay said the organization will be presenting the findings at an “Icebreaker Winter Series” session on March 25.