Who Protects Water?

Compare how laws, rights, and government powers shape water policy.

AWH.P.2.1 "Demonstrate an understanding of the principles of government, the benefits of democratic systems, and their responsibilities as citizens..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one legal power or duty for each country, then circle a government action that reflects it. Draw an arrow connecting each power or duty to the action it helps explain.

Two Water Crises, Two Legal Paths

1. In 2014, Flint, Michigan, changed its drinking-water source to the Flint River. Officials failed to use adequate corrosion control, and lead from pipes entered some homes' water. The United States has no explicit constitutional right to drinking water, but the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act gives the federal government authority to set national drinking-water standards. States usually oversee local water systems under federal rules. After the crisis became public, the federal Environmental Protection Agency issued an emergency order in 2016 requiring steps to protect Flint residents. This response shows how a national law can reach a local decision.

2. South Africa's 1996 Constitution takes a different approach: it gives everyone the right to have access to sufficient water. It requires the state to take reasonable measures, within available resources, to achieve that right progressively. During Cape Town's severe drought in 2018, city officials set a target of 50 liters per person per day and raised charges for heavy use. Those rules aimed to keep the city's water supply from running out. Residents who cut their use helped conserve water. Residents could also question whether the rules treated households fairly. A constitutional right shapes debate, but does not make water unlimited.

3. These cases show different paths from governing principles to policy. In the United States, a federal statute established standards, and a federal agency could intervene when local water safety failed. In South Africa, a constitutional right guides what governments must work toward, while local officials can set drought restrictions. Neither system makes citizen participation optional: people can report unsafe water, follow conservation rules, and demand explanations from officials. The documents also mark changes over time: the US law expanded federal oversight in 1974, and South Africa's 1996 Constitution established an enforceable water right after apartheid. Public health and fairness both depend on accountable government.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why could a federal agency act in Flint, while city officials set restrictions in Cape Town? Use the passage to explain each government's authority.

2. How do the US law and South Africa's Constitution differ in what they establish about water?

3. Compare one action residents could take in each crisis. How would each action support public health or fairness?

4. How did the documents adopted in 1974 and 1996 change government responsibilities, and how were those changes visible in the later crises?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine both cities face another drought. In four sentences, propose a fair local water rule, explain how each country's legal framework might shape its response, and name one action residents could take to help or hold officials accountable.

ANSWER KEY

Who Protects Water?

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.P.2.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one legal power or duty for each country, then circle a government action that reflects it. Draw an arrow connecting each power or duty to the action it helps explain. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why could a federal agency act in Flint, while city officials set restrictions in Cape Town? Use the passage to explain each government's authority.	**The Safe Drinking Water Act gave the federal government authority to set standards, allowing the EPA to intervene in Flint. Cape Town officials could set local drought restrictions within a system guided by South Africa's constitutional water right.**
2	How do the US law and South Africa's Constitution differ in what they establish about water?	**The US law establishes federal authority to set drinking-water standards. South Africa's Constitution establishes a right to access sufficient water and requires reasonable state measures to achieve it progressively.**
3	Compare one action residents could take in each crisis. How would each action support public health or fairness?	**Flint residents could report unsafe water to help protect public health. Cape Town residents could reduce water use to conserve the supply or question whether restrictions treated households fairly.**
4	How did the documents adopted in 1974 and 1996 change government responsibilities, and how were those changes visible in the later crises?	**The 1974 US law expanded federal oversight of drinking water, visible in the EPA's 2016 Flint order. South Africa's 1996 Constitution established an enforceable water right, which guides government action and debate over Cape Town's 2018 restrictions.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

If both cities faced another drought, I would require each city to keep public drinking stations open before allowing nonessential lawn watering. In Flint, federal drinking-water standards would still apply to the water supplied at those stations. In Cape Town, officials would need to consider the constitutional right to access sufficient water when deciding where to place them. Residents could report unsafe stations and ask officials to explain whether every neighborhood has fair access.

Accept other accurate comparisons that distinguish federal drinking-water standards from South Africa's constitutional right. For the open task, accept feasible rules that address both legal frameworks without claiming that either document guarantees an unlimited water supply.