

Piping up for PVC

I am writing to bring attention to an inaccuracy in a recent piece published by The Hill (“A public-private system to improve our nation’s water supply,” The Hill’s Congress Blog, by Keith Pemrick, Aug. 8).

The University of Michigan (UM) study cited in the piece was sponsored by the ductile iron pipe industry association (DIPRA), a connection Pemrick should have disclosed to readers. The study is also highly flawed. Specifically, its authors falsely claim that the director of Utah State University’s Buried Structures Laboratory, Steven Folkman, who has extensively analyzed the break rates of different pipe material, stated that the life expectancy of PVC pipe is limited to between 41 to 60 years. But Folkman said no such thing, and wrote a letter telling the study’s authors “there is no such statement in that paper.” The letter goes on to say that Folkman’s research, along with at least 15 other published studies from around the world, all conclude that “properly design and installed PVC will have an expected life in excess of 100 years.”

In addition to repeating this error, Pemrick’s piece omits clear downsides of ductile iron pipe. For instance, a recent City of Detroit analysis shows that the pumping efficiency for ductile iron pipe continually declines with age, and does not remain at factory specifications, as the DIPRA-sponsored UM report claims. Indeed, as reported by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in a study on pipe procurement and performance, the American Water Works Association has even concluded that ductile iron pipe in moderately corrosive soils may only last 11-14 years. Utah State University found that PVC pipe has the lowest overall failure rate. When 75 percent of all utilities have corrosive soil conditions, this is very important to take into account.

Our country’s water infrastructure is indeed in need of an upgrade, but ductile iron pipe is not the solution.

From Bruce Hollands, executive director, PVC Pipe Association, Washington, D.C.