

Thursday
3-13

Where you can get your water tested

By **BOB MONTGOMERY**
Mercury Staff Writer

POTTSTOWN— If you aren't quite sure about your water quality, and you think you may have bacteria or chemical contamination, you'll probably want to have your water tested.

There are a few laboratories locally which will test your water. The majority of their business, however, comes from large businesses and industries which are under heavier government regulations to have waste water and industrial discharges tested.

The Mercury contracted Suburban Water Testing Labs, Frederick, to test samples from 28 locations gathered during a three-month investigation.

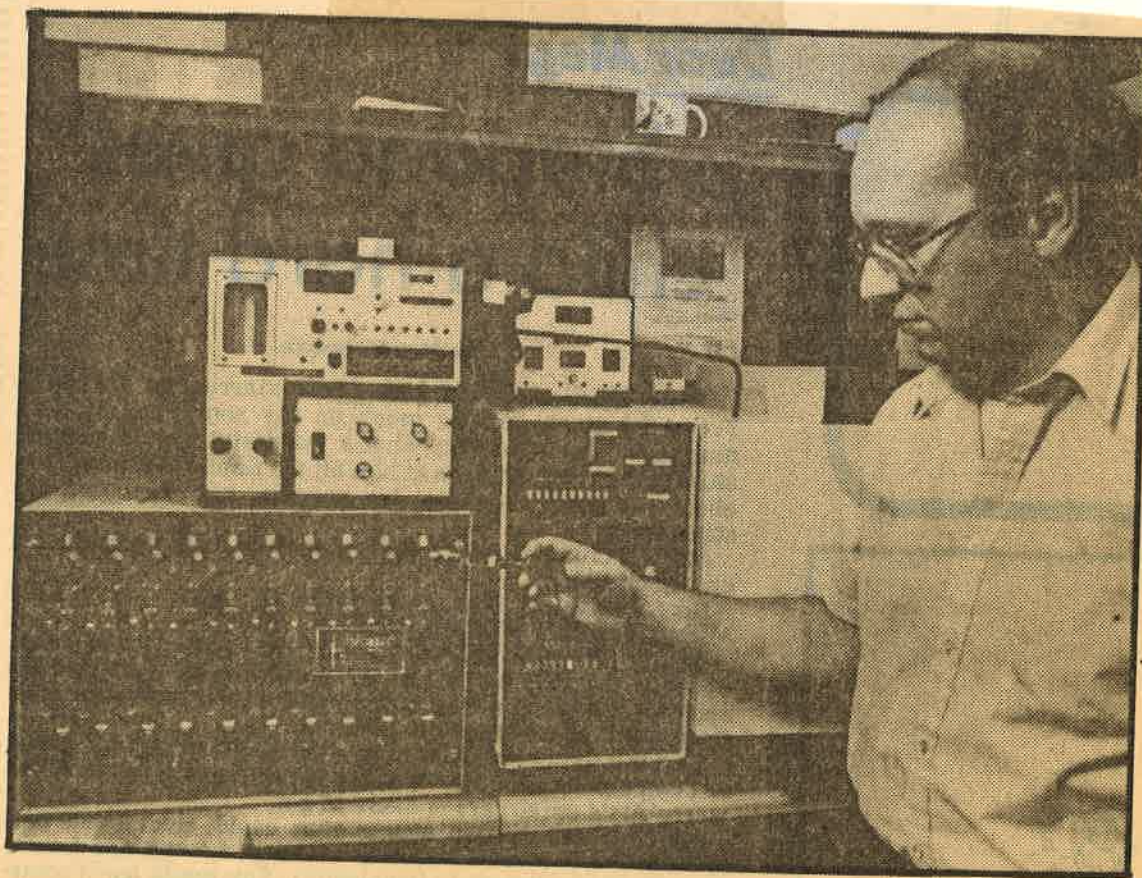
Suburban has done testing for such magazines as "Reader's Digest" and "Prevention" and for the television show "Good Morning America."

Other area laboratories contacted by The Mercury for information include RMC Laboratories, Fricks Locks Road, East Coventry Township; and Wastex Industries, 28 S. Hanover St., Pottstown.

Bacteria testing is the most common test done by laboratories. Homeowners with private wells are urged to test for coliform bacteria twice annually. Those with municipal water need not get bacteria tests done unless they suspect bacteria contamination.

The cost generally ranges from \$6 to \$20 a sample, depending on the laboratory and the procedure. If you pick up the bottle from the lab, take it home, get the sample, and return it to the lab yourself, it will save you money. The cost would be closer to \$6 to \$10.

Also if you have a private well and you live near a farm field that utilizes fertilizers — or you live near a landfill or an industry that utilizes chemicals — you



EXPERT EXPLAINS — Rick Stump, laboratory director at Suburban Water Testing Labs, Frederick, explains the process used to detect the presence of chemicals in water samples. The readings given are practically 100 percent reliable, Stump said.

Mercury Photos by Tom Kelly

may want to get an industrial solvents scan of your water.

This is more expensive, with costs ranging from \$50 to \$125 for a basic scan of chemicals most commonly found in drinking water supplies. For the money, you will get a report of what was found, and in some cases, the amount found. Generally, the lab personnel will tell you if you have too much of a chemical and if further testing is required.

If you want even more extensive testing for chemicals, you can run up a bill into the thousands of dollars.

Here is a look at Suburban, RMC, and Wastex:

Suburban: Facilities located in Temple, Berks County, and in Frederick, Montgomery County. Founded in 1963 by Donald G. Saltman, who currently serves as corporate president. Lab is certified in six categories by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department

of Environmental Resources. Lab specializes in analyzing drinking water; not waste or industrial discharges.

The Frederick laboratory was destroyed by fire in June 1985, but was rebuilt and is back in operation. The firm's partner company, Suburban Water Technologies Inc., offers a complete line of correction equipment designed to solve problems that cannot be corrected at the source.

Richard Stump, 33, of Laureldale, is laboratory director and vice president of the labs. Marie McCarter is secretary-treasurer. Suburban also has a toll-free number for information and consultation on water problems. The number is 1-800-525-6464.

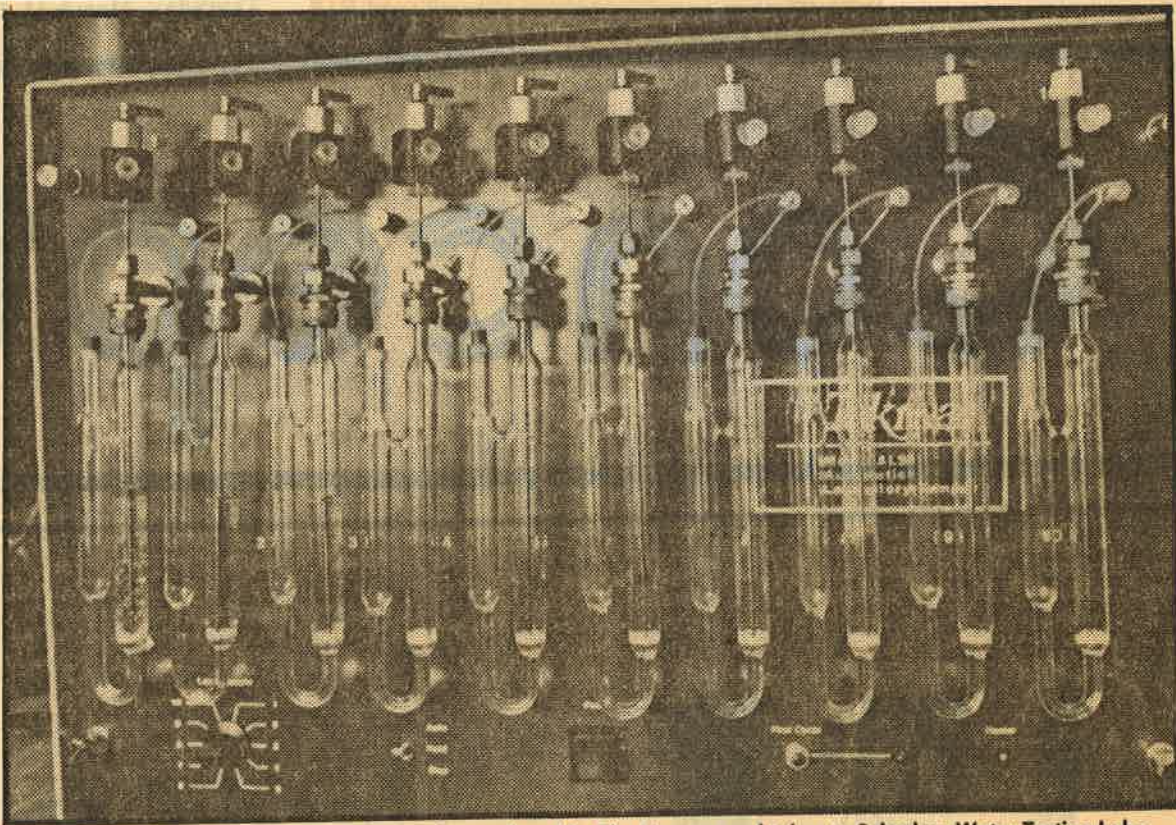
RMC Laboratories: Facilities located on Fricks Locks Road, East Coventry Township. Founded in 1967. RMC has two departments — a chemistry department which handles analytical work; and a

biology department made up of biologists who conduct stream surveys, fish surveys, etc.

Kyle Gross is laboratory supervisor. He urges regular bacteriological testing, and then chemical testing if feasible. Homeowners who live near landfills are particularly urged to get their water tested, according to Gross. Laboratory is certified.

Wastex: Local office at 28 S. Hanover St., Pottstown. Main offices at Elmwood Park, N.J. Founded in 1957. Laboratory is certified. Testing done for homeowners with private wells, businesses, industries, and municipalities. Firm noted for its environmental technology.

Donald Jones is president. Lab personnel also offer advice on how to handle water problems. Homeowners with private wells should have their water checked at least once a year, according to Jones, because "contaminants are constantly moving and spreading out."



CHEMICAL DETECTOR — Water samples gathered by The Mercury and taken to Suburban Water Testing Labs in Frederick and Temple were run through this device — a gas chromatograph — which detected any chemicals present. The chromatograph separates substances in the water. A bubble of nitrogen is injected into each sample, which forces the volatiles to move from the water to the gas. The vapor is then heated, which separates the compounds. After they are separated, the conductivity of each compound is measured by a detector. The concentrations of each chemical then are printed out on a chart.

Safeguarding the water, Chester County a leader

By **BOB MONTGOMERY**
Mercury Staff Writer

POTTSTOWN — Chester County is considered by environmental officials to be one of the leaders in protecting its citizens from bad water.

While many parts of the state are trying to bring their water standards up to the 1980s, the Chester County Health Department has been consistently in step with the times, according to Jerry Centofanti, supervising sanitarian with the state Department of Environmental Resources for Montgomery and Delaware counties.

Centofanti said Chester County not only has tougher regulations than many of DER's own standards, but it acts as its own enforcer. Plus, the county freely offers help and information to private and public water suppliers, unlike most county governments that defer the subject of water to DER.

Some of Chester County's regulations on private wells and public suppliers are so tough, in fact, that many in neighboring Montgomery and Berks counties would not be able to comply, according to a water laboratory official.

Rick Stump, laboratory director at Suburban Water Testing Labs, Frederick, said every county ought to follow Chester County's example.

"Chester County is on top of water," said Stump. "They have a sanitarian for each township and require a water test for primary and secondary contaminants on

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What are you drinking?



EDITOR'S NOTE — Mercury reporter Bob Montgomery has spent three months in an extensive sampling of the municipal water systems in the Greater Pottstown Area.

While The Mercury survey found several locales with specific problems — TCE, a carcinogen, in high levels in Collegedale and Trappe; elements of gasoline in Exeter — the general finding was that municipal water systems in our area are providing their customers with safe, if not pure, drinking water.

Safeguarding the water, Chester County a tough leader

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each new well that's put in."

Wells must be drilled according to tough county standards (with casing from top to bottom, and sealed with cement grout), and realtors are required to have bacteria and chemical tests done on homes with new wells in Chester County before an occupancy permit can be issued.

Centofanti said most water systems have excellent compliance records.

"We have an annual inspection report with each water system," Centofanti said. "Once every three years we do a sanitary survey. We go into extreme detail and cover any new equipment they've purchased, or any corrections they've done within the system.

"Other than that, they are responsible under the Pennsylvania Safe Drinking Water Act to monitor bacteriologically daily, weekly, or monthly, based on the number of customers they serve."

In addition to the frequent bacteriological tests, many systems conduct annual tests for organic chemicals, and for inorganics.

Turbidity of the water is also tested. Water that is clear will have a low turbidity reading, while water with a slightly muddy appearance, due to the presence of suspended particles, is high in turbidity. Suppliers who draw surface water must test for turbidity daily, while those who draw from ground water supplies are not required to test at all.

"I can't think of anything that's more important than safeguarding drinking water," said Gary Naumick, an environmental engineer for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Philadelphia's regional office.

Naumick said state and federal government relies on public water suppliers to protect its customers.

"Most systems are doing well complying with drinking water standards. However, in isolated incidents, there are systems with problems. Generally the compliance rate is very high, especially with the larger systems."

Centofanti said that radioactivity in water is also tested for annually by municipal suppliers. There are only two laboratories in the entire state certified to do radiological testing, he said.

Stump said residents who drink municipal water shouldn't have to pay a laboratory to test their water. "They should feel free to rely on the water company to do it," he said. "But if you get no cooperation, particularly with the smaller systems, you might want to test on your own."

Homeowners with private wells are in deeper trouble. Not only do DER statistics show that 60 percent of all private wells in the state are contaminated (the majority being bacteria contamination), most of those homeowners have no one to turn to for help.

"His water system is his problem — no one else is doing it for him," said Stump of private well owners. "They really should check it when they move in."

Stump said in the past, some laboratories, water suppliers, and government agencies have been afraid to disclose results showing water contamination, for fear of widespread panic.

"Many are still reluctant to show reports," Stump said. "They're afraid of panic, which is really a problem. They think if people see 2 parts per billion of TCE, they will panic because they don't understand.

"I think if the public saw more figures, they would come to appreciate it's a more widespread problem. The public really needs to see test results more than they are now. If they see more, like you're doing, they will appreciate the scope of the problems."

Centofanti said that increasing regulation of water by the federal government will make it more difficult for some water suppliers to conform. Many will have to spend thousands of dollars for treatment and filtration systems if the chemical contents exceed maximum levels that have been proposed, and will soon become law.

"Filtration at present time is not required by law," Centofanti said. "I would look for that within the next five years. In this area, we don't have any unfiltered surface water systems.

"Systems that take water off the (Schuylkill) river are at the mercy of the river. They'll have seasonable taste and odor problems, due to low, warm water and algae. We have a good warning system to warn a system if something spills upstream so they can shut down their intakes (valves)."

Naumick agreed that new regulations may be difficult for some to accept, but they are necessary to protect the public.

"The EPA regulatory role will be ongoing," said Naumick. "We will be phasing in various aspects on classes and standards of volatile organic contaminants, and radioactivity standards.

"Most are able to comply. The standards are being developed at very conservative levels — standards in the small-risk range. That's the good side of it. I think the public can take a lot of comfort in that."

What are you drinking?

