

Testing the waters for impurity

Associated Press

READING — The setting is pastoral. Creeks, flowing clean and clear, meander through the rolling hills that offer rustic backdrops to the homes along the rural road. On the surface, everything is tranquil. Beneath the surface, however, the scene often is more chaotic and frightening.

In Pennsylvania, according to the state Department of Environmental Resources, there are about 600,000 private water supplies. Of that number, the department says, 360,000 are polluted.

"What that breaks down to is that roughly 60 percent of the well and spring water in the state is contaminated," said Richard C. Stump, laboratory director at Suburban Water Testing Labs in Temple, Pa. "So, if you are driving down a country road, six out of 10 houses you see have contaminated water."

Requests on the rise

The number of residents who have contacted his firm to have their water supplies tested has swelled in recent years, Stump said.

"There has been an amazing increase," he said. "We probably have about 50 percent more business this year than we did last year. And it looks like that trend is going to continue."

Suburban Labs analyzes samples from about 400 different households each month, he said.

"A routine request is from people who say, 'I want my water tested for everything,'" Stump said. "And we have to tell them that you just can't do that, that it's just not feasible. Water-testing firms generally target their sampling to the list of pollutants known to exist in an area, he explained.

"The most common pollutant in the Berks area is coliform bacteria," he said. "And that can come from surface infiltration or from waste water, say, from a nearby septic tank."

The test for coliform costs \$10 if the resident brings the sample to the lab and \$16 if laboratory personnel collect the sample on-site.

"That's really the basic standard test, and it should be done twice a year on wells," Stump said. "Right



USING HIS HEAD, Mitch Rosenwald of Lansdale carries cushions into his apartment in Boston's Kenmore Square. Rosenwald, a junior at Emerson College, moved in on Sunday.

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...check the well itself," he said. "We had one case recently where someone ran over the well cap with a lawn mower, and surface water was getting into the water."

Stump stressed that a case of coliform-bacteria contamination was relatively easy to remedy.

"You can disinfect the well with regular chlorine household bleach," he said. "We give them guidance on how to do it, but basically all they have to do is pour the chlorine into the well water and make certain that it circulates throughout all the pipes in the house."

"A week or two later, we'll run another test to make certain the water is potable."

Nitrate infiltration, Stump said, ranks second on the list of common pollutants lacing water in the Berks area.

"At this point," Stump said, "I'd say nitrates are getting to be more and more of a problem."

Nitrate infiltration usually is caused by excessive use of fertilizers by farmers, he said.

"Plants like nitrogen, and the farmers naturally put the nitrates on the soil," he said. "Unfortunately, nitrates are water-soluble and cannot be filtered out of the water."

Package of tests

While coliform bacteria and nitrates rank first and second as the most common pollutants, Suburban Labs also offers a "primary package" of tests. "We test for coliform bacteria, nitrates, detergents, scan for 23 different industrial solvents, and test the hardness, the acidic levels, and iron in the water," Stump said. The package, he stressed, is not designed to reveal exact levels of contamination.

Stump said there really is not much competition in the water-analysis field.

"The thing that we run into is that each laboratory specializes in a specific area," he said. "We specialize in doing private water supplies, while most of the other laboratories in this area deal with industrial or municipal water supplies."

Problems with tainted water often seem unsolvable to residents, Stump said. He stressed, however, that the majority of water pollutants can be removed safely.

"Last year in Baumstown, for example, they found several private water supplies were contaminated by high concentrations of industrial chemicals," he said. "But several of the families have installed activated carbon filters, and now they are using their water again."

The laboratory director said people should get into the habit of having their water tested periodically.

"Who is to say the water you get out of your well in Pennsylvania isn't really coming from Ohio?" he said. "And ironically, the water that smells and tastes bad oftentimes isn't bad."

"We trust our taste and our smell a little too much when it comes to water. The only way you can know for certain that your water is safe is