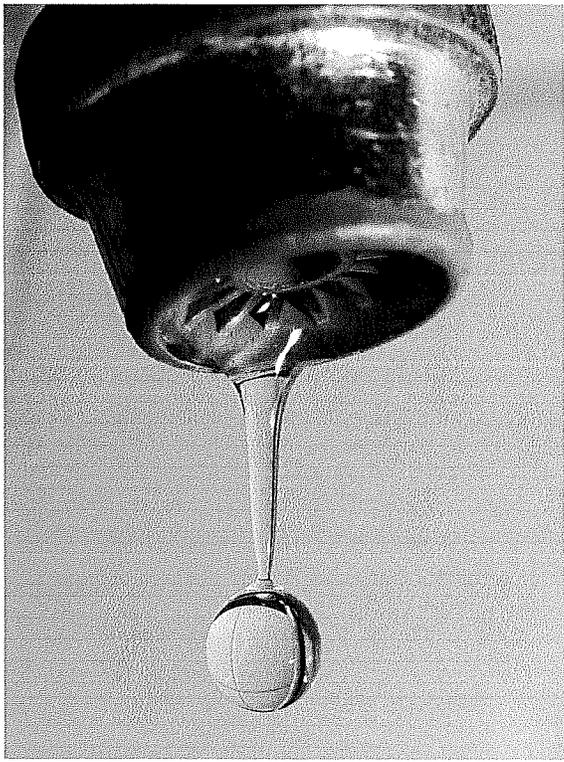


COMMISSIONER'S COLUMN

NHDES urges all private well users to test their water supply

Recent concerns over elevated levels of man-made chemicals in well water in some southern New Hampshire locales demonstrate the truth in the adage, "We never know the worth of water till the well is dry."¹ Or, as in this latest situation, until the well is suspected of being contaminated by human activity.

In New Hampshire, equal numbers of households rely on private wells and community water systems.² This is in contrast with the nation overall, in which only one in seven households uses a private well.³ While NHDES thoroughly supervises the public water systems that supply schools, restaurants, places of work and half of the state's homes, there is no similar oversight to ensure the safety of water from private wells. Consequently, it is up to well users to protect their families by testing their water and, when necessary, installing and maintaining treatment systems or using other water sources.



Too often, if water looks, smells and tastes good and no one in the family is getting sick, it is thought to be safe. This view is probably more prevalent where there are no obvious sources of contamination nearby. In reality, naturally-occurring contaminants – from our native bedrock – are far more likely to present health hazards than any human activity. One in five bedrock wells in New Hampshire has high levels of naturally-occurring arsenic, and most have levels of radon that warrant follow-up testing. Other contaminants – both natural and human in origin – are less common but occur often enough to warrant routine testing.

Consequently, NHDES urges private well users

to test their well water regularly, and provides guidance to municipalities to help ensure that private well water supplies are indeed "potable," as required

Just waiting for the grass to grow at Lower Liberty Hill Road

After nearly 10 years of extensive site investigations and remediation planning, and two construction seasons implementing the remedial action plan, cleanup of the Lower Liberty Hill Road site in Gilford has come to a conclusion. Contamination of the site dated back to the decommissioning of the Messer Street Manufactured Gas Plant (MGP), circa 1952-53. Liquid coal tar was removed from equipment at the former plant and disposed of at what was then a gravel pit on Liberty Hill Road. An unknown quantity of coal tar was disposed of at the gravel pit, then backfilled. Sometime in the 1970s, the property and surrounding area began to be developed into a residential neighborhood.

Information regarding the off-site disposal of liquid byproducts from the former Messer Street MGP first came to light in 2004. EnergyNorth (currently d/b/a Liberty Utilities), the successor owner to the company that operated and dismantled the Messer Street MGP, notified NHDES in November 2004 that it believed waste from the former Messer Street MGP was disposed of at an off-site location along Liberty Hill Road.

From late 2004 to mid-2006, EnergyNorth conducted a comprehensive site investigation focusing on four impacted properties on Liberty Hill Road and Jewett Brook,

Commissioner's Column *continued from page 1*

under the International Plumbing Code, when issuing certificates of occupancy.⁴ NHDES recommends testing all wells for 15 contaminants, plus some additional tests where human-caused contamination is a possibility. The State Public Health Laboratory and more than a dozen accredited private labs can do the testing.

Encouragingly, it seems to be increasingly common for home buyers to have well water tested, and more communities are organizing well testing events. The "Community Well Testing Toolkit" developed by Dartmouth College, in cooperation with NHDES, makes it easier for communities to hold such events.

However, outreach and education are not enough to bring about a substantial increase in private well testing. It is essential to first understand why more people don't get their well water tested, and to address those barriers. One reason more people don't test their well water is that they are not sure how they would use the test results. To address this need, NHDES has developed a unique online tool, "Be Well Informed," which provides an interpretation of lab test results along with customized recommendations regarding water treatment options. The tool was developed with funding from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in consultation with water treatment providers.

Looking ahead, NHDES is working with the New Hampshire Association of Realtors to inform both realtors and home buyers about well testing, since home buying presents a unique opportunity for well users to see the value in well testing. By working with a number of partners, we hope yearly private well water testing will become the norm in New Hampshire, resulting in long-term improvements in public health.

For more information on how to get your private well tested, search the internet for "NHDES Private Well Testing." ■

¹ Attributed to Thomas Fuller

² 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey conducted for NHDHHS

³ USGS (2014), Estimated Use of Water in the United States in 2010, Table 6. <http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1405/>

⁴ Guidance to Refine the Potable Water Definition in New Hampshire Municipal Building Codes (2016). <http://des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/pip/publications/wd/documents/wd-15-1.pdf>



Climate change is already occurring

NHDES has been working to reduce our programs' contributions to climate change and to incorporate adaptation responses into our programs. During this time many of our program staff and our stakeholders have expressed the need to have a short informational presentation that can be shared with various audiences as a background to climate change, what impacts we are seeing here in New Hampshire and what we can expect in the future.

Please feel free to view our new video, which can serve as an introduction to having an interactive discussion about climate change with your audiences.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/NHDES>

ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS



Environmental News is published six times a year by the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services.

Thomas S. Burack, **Commissioner**
Clark Freise, **Asst. Commissioner**

Division Directors
Michael Wimsatt, **Waste Management**
Craig Wright, **Air Resources**
Eugene Forbes, **Water**

Environmental News
James Martin, **Editor**
Kathryn Michener, **Layout**

Editorial Board
Catherine Coletti Timothy Drew
Sherry Godlewski Gretchen R. Hamel
Gary Lynn Barbara McMillan
Rene Pelletier Sharon Yergeau

29 Hazen Drive • Concord, NH 03301
603-271-3503
www.des.nh.gov
editor@des.nh.gov
Printed on recycled paper.