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Clean water: Cost versus benefit in Mount Olive

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Report shows contamination widespread in water systems

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MOUNT OLIVE TWP. – An engineer for a major water company serving township residents said the costs of eliminating further contaminants from water may outweigh the benefits.

Public and private water utilities across the state and nation, including N.J. American Water Co., are grappling with the issue of costs versus benefits of expensive testing to detect contaminants which may or may not adversely effect health.

“What will it cost to remove those chemicals and what are the benefits,” said Anthony Matarazzo, senior director for water quality and environmental compliance for N.J. American Water Co., which serves more than 6,000 township residents.

“We don’t have the science to demonstrate that it is necessary,” Matarazzo said.

Matarazzo’s comments follow publication of a study that questions water quality around the nation and locally and shows that water supplies probably have contaminants that are unregulated by the federal government.

More than 60,000 chemicals are used in the country but just 91 are regulated by the federal government, with the last chemical added to the list in 2001. Concerns over water quality nationally have prompted the federal government to propose a new approach to protect against contaminants in drinking water.

The problems were highlighted in a massive analysis of water quality in systems across the country, state and locally by the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research organization based in Washington, D.C. that focuses on human health and the environment.

The study also formed the basis of a multi-part series in the New York Times last December.

The study analyzed 20 million tap water quality tests performed by water utilities between 2004 and 2009. It found that water suppliers detected a total of 316 contaminants in water delivered to the public. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has enforceable standards for only 114 of the pollutants, the study said.

Local Impacts

N.J. American Water Company is the largest private water utility in the state, serving more than 2.5 million people statewide and more than 6,000 in Mount Olive. In addition, the utility provides water to 217,230 people in parts of Harding, Mendham and Mendham Township.

Matarazzo said much of the contaminants identified in the working group study were found in untreated water. There are no methods to detect low levels of these contaminants in treated water, he said.

“We don’t have the technology to see it at those levels and to quantify it,” Matarazzo said.

He said the utility meets all state and federal clean water standards.

"New Jersey American produces the highest quality water in relation to current EPA standards with the highest technology at a cost-effective rate," Matarazzo said.

But he said the effects of certain contaminants in exceedingly small levels is not known and that there are no methods to detect them at such levels.

Specifically, Matarazzo said many of the chemicals noted in the Environmental Working Group report are byproducts of the chlorine used to purify water. He said the company and the industry is reviewing alternatives to chlorine.

"The alternatives are very expensive but we are looking to apply those technologies," Matarazzo said.

Matarazzo said some filters may help but recommended that residents closely examine the claims of the devices because some filter out color and improve taste but don't eliminate contaminants.

He also advised against using bottled water which he said is far less regulated than public and private water sources.

"People are starting to understand that drinking water from the tap is a better deal and provides better protection," Matarazzo said.

One reason the EPA has failed to expand its list of regulated contaminants is that the process of testing individual compounds is "very time consuming and expensive," Matarazzo said.

He said he favors the proposal put forth recently by EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson to revise the process to considering classes of compounds rather than individual compounds.

John Scarmozza, chief engineer for the Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority, was not familiar with the working group report. The authority provides drinking water for 32,500 customers in Randolph and other area municipalities.

He said contaminants like nitrate, barium, cadmium and chlorine byproducts have been found in the utility water supplies in minute numbers below the federal limits. Such relatively small concentrations might be caused by a resident who dumped his gas can on his lawn or from runoff from lawn pesticide.

Scarmozza said contamination in minute amounts is expected and the effects on humans are not known.

"This is the price we pay for living in a modern society," Scarmozza said. "All these things (pollutants) are out there. Is it a problem? I don't know."

"We're watching for contaminants but you can't have continuous monitoring," Scarmozza said. "The fools in Washington are trying to sell people a bill of goods that somebody out there will protect them from life. You can't but we do the best we can."

Michael Lata, director of water and sewer in Mount Olive, said he was confident of the water quality for more than 7,000 customers.

"We have no issues with the water in the system," Lata said.

He said Mount Olive's wells are not influenced by surface water contamination and that filters are not necessary. However, filters are a wise idea for residents who rely on private wells in Budd Lake, where surface contamination is potentially possible, he said.

The Washington Township Municipal Utilities Authority is the potable water source for 4,675 residents. Director Paul Costic also said that while the utility meets all federal Safe Drinking Water Act standards, there are many chemicals that may be in the water but the levels are so low that the costs for removing them would be "astronomical." He said he recommends filter and not bottled water.

"People are at a greater risk of getting whatever chemicals from bottled water than from our system," Costic said.

Radon is a naturally occurring byproduct of uranium decay throughout the region and it was detected in the township water supply but at levels far below the EPA thresholds.

"We don't technically have a problem with radon," Costic said.

The potential for chemical contamination in small levels can come from various sources, from decaying plastic bottles to cancer chemotherapy agents flushed down toilets to copper settling in older pipes in homes.

"The question is how bad the by-product is," Costic said.

Leeann Brown, a spokeswoman for the Environmental Working Group, said the main focus for protecting water should be on the source of pollution and not on the utilities that receive the water. She also said that many chemicals typically found in water systems are above the recognized limits for health effects but are below the EPA thresholds. The EPA limits consider costs to remove contaminants along with potential health effects, she said.

The report cites the following as the most common unregulated, contaminants that have been linked to serious health concerns:

Bromochloroacetic acid, a tap water disinfection byproduct, that induces gene mutations and is associated with damage to DNA.

Perchlorate, a rocket fuel ingredient toxic to the thyroid gland.

MTBE (methyl tert-butyl ether), a gasoline additive and groundwater pollutant associated with liver and kidney damage, and nervous system effects.

Di-n-butylphthalate, a chemical from a group of industrial plasticizers called phthalates, that have been linked to birth defects and reproductive toxicity.

According to the report, regardless of the potential health risks, there are no legal limits on the chemicals in drinking water.

"There is not a very strong safety threshold for regulating contaminants in drinking water," Brown said. "In general, drinking water standards have been neglected for the last eight or nine year."

The recorded levels of contaminants also may be deceptive because they are often averaged out over a period of time and may not reflect temporarily high readings. Additionally, the science is not advanced enough to know the health effects of a combination of contaminants over a long period of time, she said.

"In poor quality water you could be taking in a cocktail of contaminants," Brown said. "Over a lifetime, what are the effects?"

Brown said filters can eliminate up to 90 percent of contaminants and that residents often have a false sense of security over bottled water. The working group's website notes the contaminants that can be removed by various types of filters.

In her recent statement, the EPA's Jackson outlined the new strategy for protecting public drinking water by addressing groups and not individual contaminants.

"The current approach to drinking water protection is focused on a detailed assessment of each individual contaminant of concern and can take many years," Jackson said. "This approach not only results in slow progress in addressing unregulated contaminants but also fails to take advantage of strategies for enhancing health protection cost-effectively, including advanced treatment technologies that address several contaminants at once."

For more information on the Environmental Working Group report, visit <http://www.ewg.org/tap-water/home>.