

Vermont drinking water safety efforts underfunded

Jess Aloe, Free Press Staff Writer

Published 12:02 a.m. ET April 17, 2016 | Updated 8:34 a.m. ET April 17, 2016



(Photo: GLENN RUSSELL)

Vermont's drinking water may contain dozens of substances that may be harmful to people, but many of the state's water systems are ill-equipped to deal with emerging contaminants.

The Environmental Protection Agency doesn't mandate testing for what it calls "emerging contaminants," chemicals, microorganisms and naturally occurring substances believed to cause health and environmental problems that are possibly in the water supply. The EPA comes up with a list of 30 contaminants that may be harmful to human health to test for once every five years.

Even if the federal agency did mandate testing and treatment, the cost could be prohibitively expensive for Vermont's aging water systems and the state's understaffed regulators.

Among the emerging contaminants is Perfluorooctanoic acid -- commonly known as PFOA.

Vermont has started testing water supplies across the state for PFOA after the compound was found in the water supply serving North Bennington and Pownal.

"[PFOA] could be the tip of the iceberg," said Lauren Hiel, the political director of Vermont Conservation Voters. "We need to get a better handle on what's in our water."



Bob Archer of the Wildwood West Homeowners Association takes daily readings at the development's pump house in Charlotte on Thursday, April 7, 2016. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL)

All about money

Like much else, it all boils down to money. In Vermont, many of the public water systems are tiny, run by volunteers and don't have much money to spare.

Every day, Marjorie Archer takes a water sample from the well serving the 20 families of the Wildwood West Homeowners Association, a community in Charlotte. She checks the chlorination levels daily. Periodically, she sends the samples off to a certified lab to be tested for the contaminants that could make her and her neighbors sick.

Archer has volunteered to take on the responsibility of operating the water system, helped by her husband, Bob. They do it because they're residents of the community.

"We're not going to be able to do it forever," Archer said. She worries whether the homeowners association will be able to shoulder the costs of hiring a professional operator.

Archer has been able to keep up with the stringent regulations, but says the testing can be very costly for her small community. If more contaminants are added to the testing requirements, it could become a bigger financial burden for the community. Tests range from \$15 to \$250, depending on the contaminant.

Every public water system monitors for, at minimum, total coliform and nitrate. The nitrate tests are annual, the coliform tests can range from quarterly to multiple times a month, depending on the size of the system. Other required tests are based on compliance history, water quality history, system-specific characteristics, and the treatment methods each system uses, said Ben Montross, compliance chief for the Agency of Natural Resources Drinking Water and Groundwater Protection Division.

Each water system is responsible for paying for its own testing, Montross said.

If contaminants are found, addressing the issue can take years and cost a lot of money. In Sutton, nitrates were found in the water system in June of 2013.

Nitrate contamination occurs often in agricultural areas through fertilizer runoff, and can cause a potentially fatal disease in infants known as "blue-baby syndrome."

The town is putting in a new filtration system, but it will cost \$457,000, said Town Clerk George Colburn. Sutton has just recently received approval for a mix of grants and a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to put in the system.

Colburn said the town hopes to have the new filters in place by August. In the meantime, the users of the system have been buying bottled water for the past three years.

"Like many other states, the state of Vermont is barely keeping up, if that, with what current state and federal laws require," said Chris Kilian, the director of Conservation Law Fund Vermont. Kilian also heads up the CLF's Clean Water and Healthy Forests initiative. "There aren't systems in place to deal with anything but the core pollutants."



People in Bennington attend a recent public hearing about the North Bennington water crisis. Nearby Pownal reported low levels of contamination Thursday. (Photo: Courtesy Chris Wright)

Vermont has no regulation for monitoring water quality in private wells -- wells that serve less than 10 connections. In 2011, Gov. Peter Shumlin vetoed a bill that would have required testing when the well was drilled, as well as when the property was sold.

Sen. Virginia Lyons, D-Chittenden, one of the key sponsors of that bill said she worked on the bill with environmental science students from Middlebury College. The effort began after a child in Middlebury became sick. The culprit was arsenic in his well water.

"I was extremely disappointed when it was vetoed," she said. "I think it was a really important bill."

Shumlin spokesman Scott Coriell said the bill vetoed by the governor would not have done anything to identify the PFOA issue, and that Vermont has some of the cleanest drinking water in America.

Shumlin vetoed the bill out of concern about the cost imposed on private well owners.

"We have a responsibility with every bill that we pass to ensure that we are not imposing costs on hardworking Vermonters in rural areas," Shumlin said in a statement when he vetoed the bill. "The vast majority of Vermont's well water is clean and safe."



Gov. Peter Shumlin speaks to North Bennington residents at a hearing about water. (Photo: Chris Wright photo)

But not everyone working in the drinking water world agrees.

Shaun Fielder is the executive director of the Vermont Rural Water Association, providing support, training and technical assistance to small water systems.

Fielder praised the Vermonters working to test and protect the water supply, but he also said other water contamination issues are likely to pop up in the future.

Vermont isn't prepared to deal with emerging contaminants, he said.

There's a balancing act involved, between protecting public health and paying for all of it, Fielder said. Water system operators will try to keep water as contaminant-free as possible, but tests and filtration systems are expensive.

"We don't necessarily have an open-ended checkbook to get there," he said. Fielder worries, in the wake of the revelations about PFOA, that all resources will be put toward chasing emerging chemicals, while other issues, like 100-plus-year-old pipes or lead leaching into the water, are ignored.

"This infrastructure is out of sight, out of mind, and I think it's taken for granted," he said.

Ellen Parr Doering, the deputy chief of drinking water and groundwater protection for the ANR, said her division lacks adequate funding and staff. The money from the federal government -- which makes up most of the division's budget, hasn't increased in a decade.

There isn't much hope for an increase in funding either, she said, given the current climate in Congress.

Given their restrictions, Parr Doering said, her staff does a phenomenal job.

Contact Jess Aloe at 802-660-1874 or jalo@freepressmedia.com (<mailto:jalo@freepressmedia.com>). Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jess_aloe (http://www.twitter.com/jess_aloe).

Read or Share this story: <http://bfpne.ws/1NfTUHu>