

Arsenic prompts Kenai to drill new water wells

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KENAI - The drinking water here is a little off color, an earthy tinge from the swamps that feed the public wells on the east side of town. But that's not the only taint that has the city rushing like thousands of American communities to find a new source.

Naturally occurring arsenic exceeds newly strict federal standards in two of Kenai's three municipal wells, and the state already has given it a two-year extension to clean out the low-level poison.

Responding both to that mandate and public disgust at the discoloration, the city this month will sink two new wells in an area that tests indicate should be cleaner than what currently flows from taps.

"It looks bad. It tastes bad. It's embarrassing," said Yana Pitsilionis, a manager at her father's Paradisos Restaurant in Kenai.

"This is Alaska: We have all these mountains and glaciers and we have bad water? It's embarrassing."

The restaurant typically runs its water through the soda dispenser before serving it, and that seems to improve the look and flavor, she said.

Kenai has lots of Southcentral Alaska company in trying to conform to federal arsenic rules that were tightened because of health concerns last year. Most of the others that are dealing with test results above the maximum arsenic levels are either subdivisions or village systems, though. Private wells are not regulated for arsenic, though state officials say rural Alaskans would be wise to test their supply or put an arsenic filter on taps that supply drinking water.

COMMON PROBLEM "Anyone with a well on the Kenai Peninsula has the potential to have arsenic in the water," said Susan Bulkow, Soldotna regional drinking water program coordinator for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

That's true for much of Alaska, though Southeast's geology tends not to produce as much arsenic, she said. Statewide, 25 regulated public systems - those serving 25 residences or more - have tested above the new federal standard of 10 parts per billion and are working to remove arsenic or find new water sources.

Other systems that don't serve residences but regularly provide water to more than 25 employees - Kenai Peninsula College or the Kenai liquid natural gas plant, for instance - also are working on solutions.

The state lists several Anchorage and Mat-Su subdivisions as testing higher than the new standards, though not the municipal water supplies.

Other cities, such as Soldotna, cut off some arsenic -rich wells and still managed to meet their demands, Bulkow said.

HEALTH EFFECTS The federal government formerly allowed public water to have 50 parts arsenic per billion. The new standard of 10 came after health studies indicated lower-level exposures over long periods can harm people, she said. Possible effects include cancer, and skin or respiratory maladies.

Kenai Mayor Pat Porter said arsenic is an ugly word, but it shouldn't scare people at the levels found in city water.

"When you hear that word 'arsenic,' you think, "Oh my gosh, it's going to kill me,'" she said. "But that's not going to happen. I drink it. I don't buy my water. I drink it right out of the tap."

City Manager Rick Koch said Kenai will drill and test two new wells in the Eagle Rock area near the Kenai River in October. Tests from nearby individual wells indicate that may be the best area to look, he said.

Three wells about a mile and a half away in the Beaver Creek drainage currently supply the city's average 800,000 gallons a day. Two of them have tested at 15 parts arsenic per billion, but the other - the source of the brown color - contains just 4 parts per billion, Koch said. Blending the water from the three can bring the levels into compliance, but the city needs redundancy in case the cleaner well goes offline at any given time.


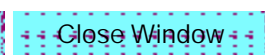
COSTLY SOLUTIONS The new wells will cost \$65,000 to \$90,000, Koch said. If they're largely clear of color and arsenic, they'll solve the city's problems. If not, Plan B might be a system such as reverse osmosis to remove arsenic. That could cost \$100,000 to \$200,000 every year. "Removal is forever," Koch said, explaining why the city wanted to try the new wells first.

The city's system must comply by the end of 2009. Other systems that have not received extensions must treat their water by the end of this year.

Bulkow said residents using their own wells should bring a water sample to a certified water laboratory for testing. Costs generally range from \$60 to \$100, she said. Homeowners with elevated levels can target treatment to taps that they use for drinking, affixing filters on those but leaving the arsenic in lawn or laundry faucets.

The filter must be designed for arsenic removal. Standard charcoal filters won't work.

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