

Can your tap water make you sick?

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PINE BLUFFS — “Water, water, everywhere, nary a drop to drink!” That line from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s epic, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” doesn’t apply to Wyoming. Our drinking water, although scarce at times, is mostly of good quality. However, it’s not without its problems. And *they* could make you sick.

In 1973, responding to public concern about contamination of water supplies, Congress passed the *Clean Water Act*. A massive effort by government and industry to decontaminate water and prevent pollution followed. Result? 80 percent of rivers and lakes in the U.S. now fully support their designated uses, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is responsible for monitoring and maintaining our water.¹

EPA’s Region 8 office in Denver sets water quality standards for Wyoming, Colorado, the Dakotas and Utah. Its attention and resources are devoted to monitoring and regulating concentrated animal feeding operations, sanitary sewer overflows, storm drain water, biosolids, pretreatment, restoration of watersheds, water quality impacts from point sources due to growth and sprawl, and operation and maintenance of infrastructure problems in small communities. It also provides Source Water Protection funding to help communities manage sources of contaminants in their watershed or above their aquifer, to prevent pollution at the source of their water supply.²

One Wyoming water problem pinpointed by EPA involves arsenic. Previously, EPA’s drinking water standard was 50 parts per billion. The new standard, effective January 26,

¹ “Unseen Causes of Clean Water,” (7/1996); Douglas G. Smith, Chairman, Biology Department, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT.
<http://www.worlddandi.com>

lowers that to 10 parts per billion, possibly presenting problems for some smaller communities.

The *Casper Star Tribune* spotlighted the issue:³

“. . . According to EPA, these systems may have trouble meeting new arsenic rule(s): Old Faithful Water System in Yellowstone National Park; Town of Lyman; Lance Creek Water District north of Lusk; Skyline Ranch, Alpine; Town of LaGrange; Warm Springs Water District outside Dubois; Fairway Estates, Douglas; Meadow Park Homeowner’s Association, Evanston; Centennial Water and Sanitation District.”

To learn more, I contacted Inter-Mountain Labs, in Sheridan, one of three Wyoming labs⁴ that test water quality. Karen Barten heads up their water lab:

“The major pollutant in Wyoming drinking water? Coliform,” she said, in answer to my question. “Nitrates are common in southeastern Wyoming. Arsenic is found around Douglas and Lusk.”

Coliform bacillus is present in the intestinal tracts of Man and animals. Its presence in water indicates fecal pollution, unhealthy if ingested. Recent studies link arsenic concentrations to increased risks of bladder and lung cancer.⁵

What to do if you suspect your tap water isn’t what it should be? “We recommend a water check once a year,” Barten said. “The basic water potability test looks for coliform, nitrates, sulfates, sodium, hardness, Ph level, electrical conductivity, and also analyzes for total dissolved solids in the water. It costs \$65.00.”

That’s sound advice. Contact them at 800-828-1407. They’ll send you a bottle. Pour a sample of your tap water into it. Return it. They’ll run the test and send the results to you.

Don’t wait until someone in the family gets sick. Do it soon.

² <http://www.epa.gov/Region8/ecosystems/>

³ “EPA: Nine Systems May Fail Water Standard,” *Casper Star Tribune*, 12/12/05.

⁴ The others: Energy Labs, 888-235-0515; Wyoming Analytical Labs, 307-362-3176.

⁵ *Casper Star Tribune*, 12/12/05.