



Drinking Water Testing

NJEF Fact Sheet
2008

Federal Law



In 1974, the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) was signed into law. It was the first nationwide law requiring mandatory testing of tap water. The SDWA required **84 contaminants be tested for in drinking water** and set standards for their allowable concentrations. However, not all public water systems test for all of these contaminants. Major factors used to determine the type of contaminants that must be monitored in a public water system are: the source of the drinking water (ground water or surface water), the number of people served by the water system, the vulnerability of the water source(s) to contamination, and previous test results.

What and Where Do We Test Our Water

Microbiological contaminants, disinfection byproducts, lead, copper, and occasionally asbestos are sampled at different locations along the distribution system. These contaminants are associated with water quality problems that may develop in the water distribution system.

Other contaminants, more closely related to source water quality, require testing before the water enters the distribution pipes. When required by regulation to be sampled, inorganic chemicals, volatile organic chemicals, synthetic organic contaminants, turbidity and disinfectant residuals are monitored by community water systems at each point-of-entry to the water distribution system after treatment. In general, community water systems have multiple points-of-entry and must submit test results for each point-of-entry to represent all the water sources used.



State vs. Federal Testing Requirements

Since **New Jersey allows for stronger than federal testing provisions**, public drinking water systems test for approximately 90 contaminants. The NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) has developed 13 drinking water standards that are stronger than the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards. Five additional drinking water contaminants (such as MTBE, a gasoline additive) are regulated in New Jersey, but do not have federal drinking water standards.

New Jersey also has a **“stronger than federal” law regarding carcinogens in drinking water**. Under the state “Safe Drinking Water Act” (passed in 1984), NJ must regulate carcinogens in drinking water based on a 1 in a million lifetime (70 year average) cancer risk, assuming it’s “scientifically, medically and technologically feasible” to test and treat the water. NJ does not allow treatment costs to be a factor in setting standards for carcinogens in drinking water. In contrast, the federal government uses a 1 in 10,000 cancer risk and includes cost benefit analysis of treatment in their formula for deriving maximum contaminant levels.

Private Well Testing



Federal laws and regulations do not directly regulate testing of private wells that serve individual homes or small businesses. Testing of these sources of drinking water is the responsibility of the owner. The maximum contaminant levels developed for public water systems are used to assess the drinking water quality of private wells. **In September 2002, New Jersey’s Private Well Testing Act went into effect. It requires the testing of the private wells and disclosure of all results when a “dwelling unit” is sold, leased, or rented.**



Drinking Water Right-to-Know (R-T-K)

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Drinking Water R-T-K Report



As a result of NJEF's efforts, the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1996 give consumers the right to know about what is in their drinking water. Every year (by July 1st), your water company must produce a Consumer Confidence Report (CCR). It includes information about contaminants found in your water, source(s) of your water, and the health effects of certain contaminants. These R-T-K reports are a valuable tool, but not an absolute indicator of either safety or danger. Their scope is limited to contaminants for which they actually test.

In 2000, NJEF strengthened NJ law with the requirement that schools, health institutions, nursing homes, and multi-unit dwellings must prominently display their CCR near major entrances.

Understanding the Basics of Your R-T-K Report

1. Information that is required by law to be included in the report:

- Source(s) of your drinking water.
- Charts listing contaminants that were detected in your water along with (1) average and the range of level(s) found in the tests, (2) date of the tests, and (3) health effects of contaminants in violation of the law.
- Likely source of the contaminant (currently most companies use generic language approved by the EPA). In the future, this information must be more specific, based on local information available as a result of mandated Source Water Assessments, due May 2003.
- Stand alone section on potential health effects for vulnerable populations (including the elderly, children, and people with compromised immune systems) even if the water supply meets all government standards;
- An explanation of terms/acronyms used in the charts; key terms to know include:
 - ⇒ **Maximum Contaminant Level MCL**—The highest concentration of a contaminant allowed in drinking water (i.e. the enforceable standard), derived from analyzing scientific data and cost benefit analysis.
 - ⇒ **Maximum Contaminant Level Goal (MCLG)**—the unenforceable health based standard that in most cases is zero.
 - ⇒ **Action Level (AL)**—Under certain circumstances, the level that triggers when and what corrosion control treatment a water system is required to install if the concentration of lead or copper is exceeded.
- A phone number for the water company to call if you have any questions or concerns.



2. There is also information that should absolutely not be in the report.

- ⇒ **Unqualified assertions of safety**, especially on the front page (who will read a CCR if you think the drinking water is safe?)
- ⇒ **Listing for chemicals** for which testing was done, but not detected (ND) (This makes the CCR less confusing for the consumer).

New Jersey Environmental Federation

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NJEF, the NJ Chapter of Clean Water Action, has 100,000 members and 100 member groups that work for environmental justice, sustainable communities and safe and affordable drinking water for all.