

New arsenic water standards on the way

By Jon Brodtkin
DAILY NEWS STAFF

Water suppliers will have to meet tough new federal arsenic regulations beginning Jan. 23, but owners of private wells will need to test their own water to make sure it

doesn't contain dangerous levels of arsenic.

"I'm sure it is a problem in a fair amount of private wells, of course, unlike the public water systems where we're confident within short order we're going to have everyone

providing water (that meets arsenic standards)," said Joe Cerutti, a hydrogeologist with the state drinking water program at the Department of Environmental Protection.

The U.S. Environmental Protection agency is lowering

the allowable amount of arsenic in water from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion. The substance has been linked to health problems including cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular and neurologi-
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cal diseases.

Local water suppliers including the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority say their water already meets the lower standard.

Levels of arsenic in MWRA water are so low that it usually isn't picked up by laboratory tests, said MWRA spokeswoman Ria Convery. The last time tests found arsenic in MWRA water was 1999, and even then it was well below the legal limit, she said.

Private wells are not regulated by the EPA, but the agency recommends testing wells at least once a year to determine if the water is safe.

"We certainly encourage them to do that on an annual basis," agreed John Palumbo, a member of the Board of Health in Mendon, where all residents have private wells.

In 2002, high levels of arsenic, lead and chromium were found in groundwater that seeped into some private wells in Mendon. Like some other towns, Palumbo said Mendon requires testing when someone installs a well but "after that, you're basically on your own."

Arsenic contamination is usually due to the natural chemistry of bedrock where

wells are drilled, rather than man-made pollution, Cerutti said. It's particularly common within an "arsenic belt" that runs through a portion of central Massachusetts including Grafton.

Grafton has regulations saying wells should be tested every three years but "we don't have any way of really enforcing that," said health agent Lois Luniewicz.

The town does require tests for new wells, and Luniewicz said she hasn't seen any arsenic problems in her two years on the job.

Maynard and Wayland are outside the arsenic belt but have been in contact with the DEP because water samples in both towns turned up arsenic exceeding 10 parts per billion in 2004. Both are expected to meet the new standards when they take effect, however, according to the DEP.

The Wayland samples with arsenic were taken from Baldwin Pond wells that had been out of use since 1999 due to other problems, said Dave Fields, acting head of the town water department. The town plans to build a treatment plant so it can use the wells again by 2008, he said.

In Maynard, a raw water sample had arsenic at levels

above the new limit, but the treated water residents drink meets the new guideline, according to the DEP.

"Bedrock wells can contain certain levels of arsenic. Once it goes through the treatment

plant, it's pulled right out," said Walt Sokolowski, director of public works in Maynard.

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