

## Fluoride shortage could push up water rates

By Jon Brodtkin / Daily News Staff

Tuesday, September 20, 2005

**T**he Massachusetts Water Resources Authority says its fluoride costs are about to increase 32 percent as a result of a nationwide shortage that could ultimately hit the wallets of MWRA ratepayers.

The added costs will not immediately cause rates to rise, but could eventually drive up costs for residents and businesses that get water from the agency.

"Anything that affects our budget has a potential effect on the water rates," said MWRA spokeswoman Ria Convery. "We'll have to try to figure out how to absorb it, if possible, without raising rates."

The agency has not had to discontinue fluoride use, however, in the wake of a national shortage caused by increased demand, especially in California, and the withdrawal from the market of major producer U.S. Agrichemicals of Florida.

Shrewsbury officials last week blamed the shortage when they suspended adding fluoride to the town's drinking water while they search for another provider. The addition of fluoride has since resumed.

The MWRA uses a little more than five tons of fluoride a day, Convery said. The agency was paying 8 a ton until late August when the Texas company Pencoco Inc. said it could no longer honor its contract, Convery said.

The MWRA obtained fluoride through short-term orders to bridge the gap until it found another long-term deal. The agency completed a public bidding process and plans to award a one-year contract to low bidder Solvay Chemicals of Texas, which will charge 6 a ton, Convery said.

"We only did it for one year to see what would happen with the market," Convery said.

The MWRA provides drinking water to 2.3 million people in 41 Boston-area communities, including Framingham, Marlborough, Waltham, Needham, Newton, Northborough, Norwood and Southborough.

The shortage appears to be affecting providers that use hydrofluosilicic acid, one of several types of fluoride added to drinking water to improve dental health. Both Shrewsbury and the MWRA use that type of fluoride.

Officials in Westborough, Wellesley and Holliston, which use sodium fluoride, said they have not had any price or supply problems.

"I ordered 4,000 pounds last week and I got it in last week," said Gary Haines, acting water superintendent in Holliston. That is enough to last half a year, he said.

Natick, which uses the same type of fluoride as Shrewsbury and the MWRA, has not experienced any problems, said public works Director Charlie Sisitsky.

But the American Water Works Association said fluoride products will be more expensive and harder to get for some time.

"The cost of water fluoridation products is expected to increase faster than the cost for other water treatment chemicals," the association wrote in an announcement posted on its Web site. "Higher prices will signal that additional investment in production capacity is needed, but it will take time for the additional capacity to be built. This market situation will likely persist for some time."

Fluoride is used in drinking water in 135 Massachusetts communities, more than one-third of those in the state, according to the Department of Public Health.

U.S. communities have been fluoridating tap water for a half-century to prevent tooth decay. The practice is controversial because some studies have linked fluoridated water to bone defects and bone cancer.