



LOCAL GOVERNMENT TOPICS



Consumer Confidence Reports: Giving the Public Facts About Their Water Quality

Water quality has become a major issue throughout the United States. Most Americans do not know the exact source of their drinking water, how it is treated, how much they use, or other types of pertinent information. However, they all know that they want it to be safe to drink.

The United States has one of the safest water supplies in the world. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 86% of the country's population served by community water systems drank water from systems that report no violations of any health-based drinking water standards. Ninety-four percent of all public water systems have no reported violations of treatment technique or maximum contaminant level (MCL). An MCL is the maximum permissible level of a contaminant in water that is delivered to any user of a public water system. The MCL is set as close to the level where there are no known or anticipated health effects as is feasible with the use of the best technology or treatment techniques.

However, national statistics don't indicate the quality and safety of the water coming out of an individual's tap. That's because drinking water quality varies from place to place, depending on the source, its condition, and the treatment it receives. Reports of contaminants and pathogens in some drinking water supplies have created concern among many people regarding how safe their water is to drink. Bottled water sales have increased in recent years, despite the fact that few people know the source or quality of what they purchase.

Now consumers have a new way to get information specifically about their town's drinking water. Since 1999, community drinking water suppliers have had to provide an annual report, commonly referred to as a consumer confidence report (or CCR), to their customers.

What Is a Consumer Confidence Report (CCR)?

As part of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) Amendments of 1996, all community water suppliers must provide an annual report to consumers on the quality of their drinking water. Information about the water source, the levels of any detected contaminants, and compliance with drinking water rules is to be included in the report. Consumer confidence reports are the centerpiece of the right-to-know provisions in the SDWA.

Every community water system that has at least 15 service connections must prepare and distribute the report. Municipalities are not the only community water suppliers. Others might include homeowners' associations, trailer parks, or other entities that provide a "community" water source.

The CCR is intended to be a beneficial tool for consumers and water suppliers, providing educational information on a vital natural resource that is used by everyone. Consumers gain information, and suppliers can let the public know what they do.

What Must Be Included in a CCR?

Water suppliers may use their own reporting format, but the CCR is intended to be brief, understandable, and educational. In general, the reports contain information about where the water supply comes from, such as groundwater wells, river, or reservoir; monitoring information for the previous year, i.e., detected contaminants; and information regarding health concerns associated with any violations that occurred during the year. More specifically, the checklist of information includes the following:

- ✓ the source of the drinking water— lake, river, groundwater, or other
- ✓ a brief summary of the susceptibility to contamination of the local drinking water source
- ✓ information about how to get a copy of the water system's complete source water assessment
- ✓ the level (or range of levels) of any contaminant found in local drinking water, as well as EPA's health-based standard (maximum contaminant level) for comparison
- ✓ the likely source of any contaminant in the local drinking water supply
- ✓ the potential health effects of any contaminant detected in violation of an EPA health standard, and an accounting of the system's actions to restore safe drinking water
- ✓ the water system's compliance with other drinking water-related rules
- ✓ an educational statement for vulnerable populations about avoiding *Cryptosporidium*
- ✓ educational information on nitrate, arsenic, or lead in areas where these contaminants are detected above 50% of EPA's standard
- ✓ phone numbers of additional sources of information, including the water system and EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline (800-426-4791)

Water suppliers can also use the CCR to provide other information of interest to the public, such as equipment upgrades, technological improvements, tour possibilities, watershed information, conservation information, staff, etc.

How Will Consumers Receive CCRs?

Many consumers will receive copies of their CCR in the mail. In some states, suppliers serving less than 10,000 persons may have the option to make the reports available to the public in ways other than by mail, such as newspaper, local libraries, etc. In Illinois, the requirement that the CCR be sent to all customers has not been waived (as of July 1, 1999). According to the Illinois EPA:

1. A copy of the CCR must be sent to all customers (defined as connections or bill payers) and to the Illinois EPA.
2. A good faith effort must be made to try to reach all consumers of the water supply who do not receive bills. The water system must provide the report in alternative languages if it serves a sizeable non-English speaking population.
3. Systems serving populations of over 100,000 must post their CCR on a publicly available Internet site.

When Are the Reports Issued?

The first report was issued in October 1999. Reports now are to be issued annually by July 1. Each year's report provides information for the previous calendar year.

In addition, water suppliers are currently required to notify consumers within 72 hours if they detect the following problems during routine testing throughout the year:

- ✓ contaminants exceeding the MCL (maximum contaminant level)
- ✓ other violations of EPA standards that "have the potential to have serious adverse effects on human health as a result of short-term exposure"

Consumers with questions about any reported violations or frequency of testing should contact their water supplier, the Illinois EPA, or their local health department for information on potential health effects, etc.

What Contaminants Do Water Suppliers Test For?

A complete list of the over 75 contaminants that are tested for and their possible sources can be obtained on the U.S. EPA website at www.epa.gov/safewater/dwhealth.html. Potential contaminants are classified in five general categories:

- ◆ *Microbiological Contaminants*
Examples include coliform bacteria, *E. coli*, and turbidity.
- ◆ *Inorganic Contaminants*
Examples include naturally occurring elements, such as copper, lead, mercury, and nitrate. Man-made compounds such as asbestos are also included.
- ◆ *Synthetic Organic Contaminants*
Examples include currently registered pesticides, such as 2, 4-D and atrazine. Also included are some suspended pesticides, such as chlordane and Silvex.

- ◆ *Volatile Organic Contaminants (VOCs)*
Potential sources of these contaminants include leachate from gas storage tanks and discharge from various industrial chemical factories.
- ◆ *Radioactive Contaminants*
These compounds result from the erosion of natural and man-made deposits.

Are Any Potential Contaminants Found in the Midwest?

Possible contaminants include both natural and man-made materials.

Some pesticides commonly used in the Midwest by farmers and homeowners for weed and insect control, such as herbicides containing 2, 4-D, are a potential source of contamination. These pesticides are sold under numerous trade names for weed control for agricultural and lawn care purposes. Water samples are also screened for a number of additional herbicides and insecticides.

Tests are also conducted for nitrates. Possible sources of nitrates include lawn and farm fertilizers, septic systems, livestock waste, and even organic matter in the natural environment.

Many of the volatile organic contaminants (VOCs) originate from industrial factories and other manufacturing sites. However, benzene is a contaminant that can result from leaking gasoline fuel-storage tanks, which some homeowners may have on their property.

What About Bottled Water?

Currently, bottled water manufacturers are not required to provide information similar to the consumer confidence report. For further information on purchasing or using bottled water, contact your county U of I Extension office and ask for

Land and Water Fact Sheet #19, "Bottled Water—Crystal Clear Choice or Cloudy Dilemma?"

What About Private Well Owners?

Anyone who is a community water supply customer—whether a homeowner, renter, or farmer—should receive CCR information.

Most farmers and many rural homeowners do not use public water supplies, however. They have their own private wells. Private well owners are not covered under these reporting regulations, and they are not required to test for or provide any water quality information.

Still, private well owners should be careful to use proper care to avoid contaminating their own well, which can lead to the potential for contaminants to enter the public water supply. Private well owners should have their water tested for bacteria and nitrate about once per year. Local health departments and U of I Extension offices have lists of water testing laboratories in Illinois.

Where Can I Get More Information on Water Quality?

A number of resources are available to public and private well users regarding water quality. U of I Extension, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Illinois Department of Agriculture, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the Environmental Protection Agency can all offer assistance. Several of the state agencies have a local office in each county. In addition to these agencies, public water suppliers, local health departments, farm organizations, and a number of private businesses can offer assistance.

This fact sheet was adapted from “Consumer Confidence Drinking Water Quality Reports: Information and Implications for Consumers, Homeowners, and Farmers,” University of Illinois Extension Fact Sheet, Rockford Extension Center, July 1999.

This material edited by:

John Church, Extension Educator, Natural Resources, University of Illinois Extension

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