



Date: August 4, 2008

General questions: Patrick O'Neill, 971-673-1282

Technical questions: Sujata Joshi, 971-673-1213

Study finds naturally-occurring arsenic in some Douglas County wells

The Oregon Department of Human Services State Public Health Division (OPHD) has found naturally-occurring arsenic at levels above the safe drinking water standard in a few of 127 privately-owned wells tested during June 2008 in the Sutherlin, Yoncalla and Oakland areas. The public drinking water systems serving these communities contain no detectable levels of arsenic.

Arsenic was not detected in most of the wells tested. However, some of the wells had arsenic levels above the safe drinking water standard of 10 parts per billion (10 ppb). Of particular concern are a small number of wells with levels above 200 ppb.

The study was prompted by the Douglas County Health Department's concern about naturally-occurring arsenic in private household wells. Studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s showed elevated levels of arsenic in wells in the Sutherlin, Yoncalla and Oakland areas, most likely from natural deposits in the bedrock and soil.

Most of the wells with arsenic levels above the drinking water standard are located east of Sutherlin in the Nonpareil area, but it remains unclear why some wells in that area had high levels and others did not.

"We did this study to find out whether wells in this area still have elevated levels of arsenic," said Sujata Joshi, epidemiologist for OPHD's Environmental Health Assessment Program. "We also wanted to know the locations of wells with high arsenic levels so we could identify areas where well owners should be advised to test their water for arsenic and take steps to protect their health."

The health effects of arsenic exposure are well documented. Short-term health effects such as stomach pain, nausea and vomiting probably would not be seen even at the maximum levels detected in this study. However, these levels could result in long-term health effects such as increased risk for various types of cancer.

“Drinking, cooking and preparing foods with well water is the main concern in homes where arsenic levels are higher than the standard,” said Joshi. “But other household uses like bathing, washing dishes and doing laundry do not pose a health risk.”

OPHD recommends that residents not drink, cook or prepare food with water containing more than 10 ppb of arsenic. Pets also should not drink water with arsenic levels above 10 ppb. Joshi stated that OPHD strongly recommends that private well owners regularly have their wells tested not only test for arsenic, but also for nitrates and bacteria.

“For private well owners, regular testing is an important investment in their family’s health and safety,” she said.

Well-testing kits are available free of charge at Sutherlin City Hall during normal business hours. The kits include bottles for three samples and come with sampling instructions. Individuals interested in learning more about certified well water testing labs in Oregon and other resources for private well owners can visit <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/shine/sutherlinsite.shtml>.

OPHD has notified all study participants of the results of their well tests. Well owners and others in the community will receive detailed information and resources through outreach and a public information session scheduled for later in August. A full assessment of the test results will be released in a report in November. For more information about the arsenic study or for additional questions about individual test results, call Sujata Joshi at 971-673-1213 or Karen Bishop at 971-673-1219.

###