



Applying knowledge to improve water quality

Great Lakes

Regional Water Program

A Partnership of USDA CSREES
& Land Grant Colleges and Universities

Social Dimensions of Private Well Testing

GREAT LAKES
REGION

National Themes:

Drinking Water and Human Health
Water Policy and Economics

Project Description

There is a history of private well testing programs across the Upper Midwest, organized by Extension, by local government units, through private testing labs, or by other organizations. Why do people test – or not test – their water? Researchers have some ideas, but these may not be accurate or complete. Program organizers have described some of the reasons for not participating in testing programs, but many barriers remain unidentified. This lack of understanding among natural resources and public health professionals about why private well owners choose not to get their water tested can affect the way testing clinics are implemented and promoted. This multi-state project (Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin) will characterize the social dimensions of private well testing and identify barriers or challenges that prevent or discourage well owners from getting their well water tested.

Actions

To date, the project staff have established state advisory groups to collect and characterize stakeholder perspectives and have designed and conducted a tri-state survey. Two thousand, six hundred and ninety surveys were mailed with a response rate of 64% (1732 surveys returned). Response rate varied between states; possibly due to different incentives and target populations. The survey has helped identify:

- well water use and testing, satisfaction with water quality, water safety judgments, and beliefs about overall water quality and well water risk;
- barriers and incentives to private well testing and how these are distributed among the survey respondents, including understanding how demographics and beliefs are related to behavior;
- differences among people who test through an agency-sponsored program compared to those who test privately;
- informational needs about well water testing and preferences for receiving information, test kits, and results;



Getting water tested is simple and inexpensive. This study investigates the reasons people test, or don't test, their well water. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

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- suggestions for how private well testing could be promoted and ways in which well-testing programs and educational materials can reach more private well owners; and
- participant suggestions for what is needed to make it easier for residents to test their private well water.

Outcomes

Survey results show that, in general, people believe their untreated well water is safe (67% of respondents), and over half of respondents indicated they are not worried about health risks from their well water.

Reasons for Testing

The most commonly selected reasons for having water tested were a change in the taste, smell or appearance of well water, and learning that neighbors have contaminated well water. Two-thirds of the respondents indicated they would have their water tested

if there was a program in their area. The most commonly selected reason for not having water tested was “we have been drinking water for years without having problems.” Other common reasons selected were “not knowing what to test for” or “not knowing how to test.”

Preferred Testing Procedures and Information Sources

People who test through a test program prefer to pick up their water test kit and return their water sample to a local location. Those who test outside of a program preferred using mail for getting kits and returning water samples. Both groups preferred to get their well water test results by mail.

Participants indicated that they would first look for well water information from the local public health department or online (75% of participants had access to the internet at home). Other preferred sources were the state health or environmental quality department, laboratories, and Extension. Well water information is produced and provided by multiple entities; there is a need to develop outreach strategies that can be applied across settings by many partners so residents get accurate and consistent information from each source.



To ensure safe water, it is important to get private well water tested. Photo by Barb Liukkonen.



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