“I want to just understand.”

— Father Bill Rogalla, the priest who first discovered arsenic in his water in July after being diagnosed with a second type of cancer.

Arsenic and old land

Highest arsenic levels found in one-mile circle in Cow Island

Kathy Goguet

Arsenic levels of over 10 parts per billion, which is unsafe, were discovered in 10 of the 50 wells tested in Cow Island. At least one-fourth of the area's wells contained arsenic above the federal limit of 10 parts per billion. Eleven of Cow Island's wells were sampled for arsenic, but only one was at a safe level. There are 22 wells in Cow Island, and at least 20 of them contain arsenic. In April, the Diocese of Lafayette announced that a method for testing water was not being used. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that 10,000 people in the area were at risk and qualified for "emergency" funding to pay for parish water lines. Residents of Cow Island have reason to be suspicious of state officials who have assured them that there was no arsenic in their water. The best thing to do is put them on private water wells, officials say.

A controversial place

Results of the duplicate water tests are similar. Tests by the Diocese and The Daily Advertiser confirm levels of arsenic. The state government says that the federal government says in June. The newspaper paid about $600 for tests by the Diocese and The Daily Advertiser. Of 10 wells, nine of them contained arsenic above the federal limit, and one well did not contain any arsenic. Farmers who were told not to test their wells were not aware of the arsenic levels. The government has shown unsafe levels of arsenic in groundwater, the state says. But the state government says that the federal government says in June.

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Cow Island, Louisiana

Cow Island is not really an island.

Neither is Fort Island. Or Dog Island. Or even Desmarais Island.

According to Arville Touchet, a real estate agent and Bengal agent, the area was named long after the 1906 water survey. The first official to settle on the area was Dr. Pierre de la Vergne, a trailblazer and explorer. Touchet said "alight" with one of several unusual spells — including the wet season. It is the wet season, which lasts from May to September.

"It’s a poetic justice. Most of the Cajuns were newcomers at heart, fishing fishermen," Touchet said. "They called them 'islands' because they lived in a sea of trees in a sea of land.

Cow Island was originally called Isle des Blancs. Local Cajuns have sometimes said that the name carries on to refer to the island and other areas, including the bayou and the river. There are at least 20 so-called "islands" in the vicinity of Cow Island.
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Arsenic

"All the data is still in the review stage," says Bob Johannsen, spokesman for the state's DHQH. He says scientists from his agency are still investigating the possible clusters. Johannsen said it has taken years to find such clusters—children born on the same day and near the same river. But who's been affected? maybe adults...

Jan 19, 2006

Arsenic

"All the data is still in the review...take the water situation very seriously."

"I don't even let my dog drink the water now," Ashley said.

-Jan Risher

Venessa Perry of Forked Island talks about the pain of losing her mother, Gloria Abshire, to cancer in July. Perry has crusaded for awareness of the arsenic in the water and cancer rates in the area. Perry's grandparents, who also live in Forked Island, both have cancer.

Moving isn't an option for most other residents either, but they hope to find solutions—whether it's switching or...completely new water system."

"That's why you vote. You hope that the easiest and most obvious thing they could do is..."

State Sen. Nick Gautreaux, D-Monroe, is trying to help. His state Rep. Mickey Fitch, D-Abbeville, coordinated the initial meeting with state officials. Gautreaux said although there is a tendency in the area to mistrust the government, he is impressed with the state involvement so far.

"The solutions always come in being aware of the problem," Gautreaux said. "If the community didn't come out the way they did, we would have never known there was a problem."

(Reporter Jan Risher contributed to this story.

Chris Greene of Kaplan watches as Cow Island's David Hebert, reflected in mirror, prepares to haul bales of hay to his cattle.

Ashley Couvillon, Cow Island

Unlike many other 26-year-olds, Ashley Couvillon loves her life in the country and that "there's nothing going on in Cow Island."

Until now. Her 28-year-old sister Andrea agrees.

"It's very shocking and kind of disturbing to find out your water is contaminated and you've been drinking it for all these years," Andrea said.

The sisters both said they feel somewhat protective of the place their family has called home for generations.

"How people know about Cow Island, but I don't like people knowing about it because of the water situation," Andrea said.

"I love Cow Island. I loved growing up in Cow Island. I love being from the country," Ashley said.

Andrea said that she recently was talking with fellow University of Louisiana students about the price of gas and was shocked by the difference living "in the country" made in their lives. "We'd like, 'we've got a gas tank in our yard. It's a different way of life than in the city," Andrea said.

Both sisters said they have taken the water situation very seriously.

"I don't even let my dog drink the water now," Ashley said.

-Jan Risher

Parts Per Million/Billion Perspective

On Jan. 22, 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency announced a new standard to acceptable arsenic in public water systems. The Safe Drinking Water Amendment, set to go into effect Jan. 30, sets a new standard for arsenic in drinking water at 10 parts per billion. EPA's proposed regulation addresses the long-term chronic effects of exposure to inorganic arsenic in drinking water.

The EPA confirmed that chronic effects at concentrations of arsenic include at least four types of cancer: skin, bladder, lung and prostate.

Non-cancerous effects include dermatitis, keratinization and mutagenic changes in the liver and kidney, as well as anemia, keratoconjunctivitis, dermatitis (e.g., acne), keratomalacia, hematological (e.g., anemia, paleony, megaloblastic, immunologic, reproductive/developmental) effects.

SOURCE: www.epa.gov/safewater