Don’t drink or cook with the water

Tests by the Department of Environmental Quality and The Daily Advertiser show reason for concern for Cow Island residents

By Kayla Gagnet and Juli Metzger

The St. Anne's Cemetery is nestled in a wet area. Photo by Claudia B. Laws.

Arsenic levels

The graphic at right depicts the Cow Island and Forked Island areas surveyed and tested by regional labs in drinking water for both The Advertiser and Entik Laboratories and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Locations marked on specific locations tested, in 2001, the environmental Protection Agency changed its standards of acceptable arsenic levels from 10 parts per billion (ppb) in 2000 to 10 ppb. The DEQ's standards are only for public systems, however, this standards represent the level of arsenic considered to be safe.

LEGEND

Advertiser

Water wells tested by The Advertiser analyzed by Entik Labs and results of contamination in ppb.

DEQ

Water tests wells by DEQ and results of contamination in ppb.

Source: Report was based on Louisiana DEQ engineering map of water quality sample sites, Maricela Denaux, LA DEQ Engineer, and Kayla Gagnet, reporter.

How we tested the water:

Reports Kayla Gagnet and Jim Robbe obtained water samples from Cow Island and Forked Island areas. The samples were sent to Entik Laboratories, which is certified to test for arsenic in drinking water by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals. The reporters knocked on doors and asked for permission to take samples. When residents agreed, reporters first pasteurized the sample by letting water run for 30 minutes. Then, water, from the tap or from the well head was put into the containers, which contained the preservative nitric acid. The sealed containers were then labeled with the date the sample was taken and assigned a number that corresponded to the location where it was collected. The information was kept with reporter's notes. The samples were analyzed via the U.S. postal service from Kayla Gagnet, reporter.

Department of Health and Hospitals. Kayla Gagnet along with Brian Ballier is concerned in the Five O’Clock Grocery stores they ran. She said they were surprised when a DEQ official told them that cow wells had arsenic that 10 ppb wasn’t high enough. "It came back around 59 ppb and they told her not to worry about it. I said I wished he would have talked to me or Brian," Ballier said. They maintained that it was "an error and it wasn’t bad," said Kayla Gagnet. Ballier said 59 ppb is enough to cause concern over a period of years. Kayla Gagnet is a research assistant official who has done studies on the health effects of arsenic in drinking water. "It is better than 10 ppb. That is what worries me referring to the EPA standard. It is not high enough that you would see short-term health problems, but if you drink it over 10, 20, 30 years, you are going to have increased health risks," Ballier concluded.

Kamelobelo’s study indicates large long-term ingestion of water that contains more than 5 ppb arsenic. "Arsenic is a neurotoxin that is very toxic for the body. It damages the liver and kidneys," said Brian Ballier, owner of Five O’Clock Grocery. "It is very important that we push for arsenic to be removed from the drinking water and that the EPA standard be reduced," Ballier said.

Information was public, did they push for this to be removed? "It was pushed, it was removed in January 2006," Wilson said. In January 2006, with the Safe Drinking Water Act, the EPA adopted a new standard requiring public water systems to comply with arsenic levels not to exceed 10 ppb by January 2006. The pasteurization of water is done to prevent bacterial contamination of the water and is used to determine what’s safe for drinking water and the public system or well. Health officials are divided on what levels are safe to drink. "There’s no clear-cut off for what amount of arsenic would have an impact on human health," said Bob Arntzen, spokesman for the state Department of Health and Hospitals.

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