

PANEL

Municipal Water Quality Problems and Information Needs

Question/Answer Session

Question: I know that water quality standards are applicable to the water only after it has been treated. Do you see any value in making the standards applicable to the water source?

Cordova: The drinking water standards we enforce are at the consumer's tap. The studies done by the Environmental Improvement Division on source water or ground water are administered by that division under the Ground Water Program. In our particular program, however, we're concerned only with water at the consumer's tap after treatment has occurred.

Question: If fluorine is not that dangerous, can the standard be changed to reflect an acceptable level of fluorine? We don't know what to do with our water system, whether to go ahead and improve it or just wait for a decision. But, we'd like to have a permanent standard instead of a temporary one.

Cordova: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is attempting to change the standard, but before it can be changed, the EPA has to conduct several studies across the nation to determine the acceptable standard. I understand there are a couple of alternatives being considered. One sets twice the maximum contaminant level as the primary drinking water standard. Any level less than that would be considered a secondary drinking water standard. As you are aware, in New Mexico we do not enforce the secondary drinking water standard. We do recommend that the communities meet those water standards, but we do not enforce them. It is our opinion that "brown" teeth are really not a health problem. Instead it's really an aesthetic requirement. We think that because the problem is an aesthetic one, the secondary standard is adequate.

Question: Different municipalities are regulating the quality of their water. I assume that water samples are being taken at different municipalities to make sure that these waters meet the standards. Are the sampling reports available for public preview?

Cordova: Yes, we have a compilation of all the chemical analyses that have been conducted for every well that serves a public water system in the state. The report contains not

only the primary standards, but also the secondary standards.

Question: How frequently is this updated and in what form is the data available?

Cordova: The data are current as of 1980. We're now in the process of trying to update that. We don't see that the data has changed that much from 1980, but we feel that we need to keep it current so we plan to update it every three years.

Question: It seems that a lot of laboratory resources are being used to monitor parameters that barely, if at all, show up as detectable quantities. I am thinking specifically about parameters such as those for pesticides and silver which I've never seen in any drinking water system. Is there some element of overkill in the monitoring for compliance with maximum contaminant levels? Could some of these vital laboratory resources be directed toward more prudent activities such as organics?

Cordova: One reason for the extensive sampling program is that we're mandated to follow it under the state drinking water standards. We recognize that across the nation neither pesticides nor silver have been detected in any public water supply. In addition, there are several parameters we continuously monitored for that have not been detected anywhere in the nation, including New Mexico. However, we do not have the prerogative to stop monitoring even if the parameters are not there. Several groups are concerned about this practice and those concerns have been forwarded to the EPA through the state liaison group. This group is now trying to provide for some changes in the act itself that will allow for reduced monitoring. For example, monitoring would be reduced if over a period of years the community water system did not detect any arsenic, fluoride or any other particular contaminant. Under those circumstances, provisions could be made to allow the community to resample either every 10 years or some other sensible resampling program. We are concerned about organics present in water supplies and, as I mentioned earlier, we are now developing a plan to initiate a statewide sampling program of all community water supplies. So we do want to do some of these things but it really depends upon funding. If the funding is not coming from the federal government, then we have to rely on state government to come up with that additional funding.

Question: Is there a program or schedule to sample for gerardia in any of our water systems?

Cordova: The current method for gerardia sampling has proved ineffective and unreliable. We have sampled for gerardia in some surface water supplies, most recently in Chama. However, proper sampling is not only costly but also very, very time-consuming. We will take samples for gerardia if we have reason to believe that residents in the area may have been exposed to it. However, we don't do routine sampling.

Question: Mr. Noland, it is my understanding that all city wells basically have the same design. You mentioned that wells are very expensive, so wouldn't the city get more money from its investment if each well was designed according to its site-specific requirements?

Noland: Before I came with the city, I understand that this method was looked into. However, it was determined that it was cheaper to use the standard well specifications.

Question: Have the city officials come up with any innovative methods for funding water needs, other than tax increases or sewer tax increases? What sort of funding methods are available in light of decreasing federal and state budgets?

Noland: Albuquerque is looking at everything it can think of. We were approached recently by a large accounting firm that was talking about lease/purchasing programs for liquid waste treatment facilities. It would work, because one of the largest costs we have is in capital expansion. If we can figure out a way to accomplish that without going into debt, it would be beneficial.

Question: I would like to ask Mr. DiLuzio, Mr. Noland and Mr. Patterson if their problems would be reduced if the demand for water was less. And if that's true, have your communities looked into water conservation methods either by decreased rates or by charging differential rates?

Patterson: I think most cities are not looking toward reducing their demand because reduced demand for water means reduced growth in the community. Of course, any time you increase the demand you're increasing the problems associated with the additional water rights needed to legally produce the water. In Carlsbad, the developer pays for the extension of the water line and the city pays for the oversized line necessary for future development in the area. We are looking at some alternative methods because of the slowdown in housing to start to provide incentives, but we haven't come up with any that appear to be working.

No land:

Albuquerque has a volunteer program; we have a Water Conservation Officer and we make information available to people who are interested in it. But to generate much interest in a conservation program you have to have a water shortage and a water delivery shortage. Fortunately, Albuquerque has neither of those problems. Our system is designed to deliver about 250 gallons per day per capita. It costs a lot of money to get into that design and so we need to get some return on the capital investment. However, if people want to become involved in water conservation, I'm interested in it. I'm also interested in it on a long-range term so that we can lower our capital investment and help out there. I think we're anticipating a shortage of water rights in about 2015-2020. I wouldn't see a mandatory program coming about, but I can see water conservation encouraged through the rate structure.

DiLuzio:

Water companies tell me that increasing the rates is one of the best conservation measures to be found. Increased rates cause consumption to go down, at least in our community. But when the water company is investor-owned with a fixed cost on their debt, the rates still go up because somebody has to pay the fixed costs. The same thing happened when they put price controls on natural gas. People were griping because they were saving gas but their utility bills still went much higher. So, conservation is a very tricky thing. If you do it right, you can still reduce your capital investments. You also can reduce the cost of treatment facilities because conservation also lowers the sewage flow.