The Wisconsin REALTORS® Association
REAL ESTATE ADVISOR

Is Your Drinking Water Safe?
(Private Wells)

Drinking a glass of water is usually considered a healthy activity, but on occasion, media coverage of water quality issues has made many people think twice before filling a glass from the tap. In one recent example, the EPA proposed to reduce the maximum allowable amount of arsenic in public water systems from 50 parts per billion (ppb) to 10 ppb by 2006. More recent EPA reports suggest that the safe level for arsenic may be three (3) ppb. While high arsenic levels are rarely an issue for public water supplies, they are more common in private wells

The truth is that no water is naturally pure, not even bottled water. In nature, water collects impurities from everything it touches as it flows in streams, sits in lakes and filters through layers of soil and rock in the ground. Some of these substances are harmless, but at certain levels some minerals can make water unpalatable or even unsafe. While most drinking water is safe, you should know how to check for unsafe levels of contaminants in the water that is pumped from your well when you turn on your faucet.

It is the responsibility of the homeowner to maintain and test a home's well water. For most well owners, the last time the water was tested was when they put in the well or purchased their home. The DNR recommends testing well water if a change in taste, odor, or color is noted or if the well is modified in any way. Although there are some reasons for change in taste and color that are not health threatening, it is best to have testing done to identify and remove any contaminants. Even if there have been no changes in the smell, taste, or appearance of your water, the DNR recommends yearly testing.

When testing well water, it is important to know what contaminants to test for, how to test, and what lab to use. The DNR identifies bacteria, nitrates, and lead tests as the most important, but other testing may be necessary due to local conditions. The local DNR water quality specialist will be familiar with local conditions and can tell you what tests should be done in your area. Your local DNR water quality specialist is _____ . (insert the regional contact info by going to: http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/dwg/regionstaff.htm or call (608) 266-0821.)

Bacteriological, nitrate, lead, and other testing kits, as well as sampling and pricing information may be obtained from any certified laboratory. Check the yellow pages for labs in your area. You can also find a list of labs on the DNR web site at http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/dwg/welltest.htm#cert%20labs or by calling the DNR at (608) 266-0821, the Central Wisconsin Groundwater Center at (715) 346-4270, or your local health department. The State Laboratory of Hygiene is one lab that will provide testing kits, for a fee across the state. You can find out more by phone at (800) 442-4618 or (608) 224-6202 or at http://www.slh.wisc.edu/ehd/testfee.html.

If test results show contamination, the DNR drinking water specialists can be used as a resource for help in fixing the problem. Some contaminants cannot be removed; filtration, chlorinization, reverse osmosis systems, or water additives may treat others. A large number of treatment devices have been approved for a wide list of contaminants. If none of these treatments rehabilitate the well, it may need to be abandoned. For more information, contact your local DNR drinking water specialist.

For an EPA overview of drinking water issues, read *Water on Tap: A Consumer's Guide to the Nation's Drinking Water* at http://www.epa.gov/safewater/wot/wot.html. For other assistance, please contact the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791.