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Public health officials urge testing of Sutherlin-area wells; newly completed study shows high levels of arsenic in some areas

After finding high levels of naturally occurring arsenic in some privately owned Sutherlin-area wells, state public health officials are urging area residents who have not tested their wells to do so.

Testing has found that some private wells near the Douglas County town have arsenic levels of 460 parts per billion, or more than 40 times higher than the 10 ppb considered safe for drinking water. High levels of arsenic can put people at increased risk for skin, lung and bladder cancers, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and skin lesions.

Sutherlin-area well testing has been done by the Oregon Department of Human Services Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP), which says most affected well owners are aware of the potential problem. "We found that most people with high arsenic levels already are using bottled water for drinking and cooking," says EHAP epidemiologist Sujata Joshi.

Last year, EHAP invited well owners in the Sutherlin, Oakland and Yoncalla areas to participate in free well testing, which found that most wells had no detectable levels of arsenic. However, a group of wells tested in the Nonpareil and Hinkle Creek areas east of Sutherlin showed arsenic levels higher than 200 ppb. Drinking and cooking with bottled water is encouraged anytime arsenic levels exceed 10 ppb.

"The people whose wells we tested know about their health risks but we're concerned about those who may not know the levels of arsenic in their wells," says Joshi. A new EHAP report of the area's well-testing findings plus an arsenic fact sheet and links to other resources for well owners are posted at

www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/ehap/ on the DHS Web site. “This report basically confirms the historical data we have from the 1970s and provides updated information on the health risks for drinking arsenic-contaminated water,” Joshi says.

She says EHAP contacted all well owners who participated in the free testing project, mailed additional information to residents and held a public meeting in August 2008.

Naturally occurring arsenic is a health concern for well owners in many parts of Oregon, Joshi says, with natural deposits in underground bedrock being the most likely source of the Sutherlin area’s groundwater arsenic. Oregon real estate transactions now require testing for arsenic, along with nitrates and bacteria.

Private well owners who want health and testing information may contact Joshi at 1-877-290-6767. She says the most reliable data are produced by state-certified laboratories, which undergo an extensive accreditation process. Names of certified labs – the nearest to Sutherlin is Umpqua Research Company in Myrtle Creek – are available online at www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/orelap/docs/acclab.pdf or by calling 503-693-4122.

Joshi says EHAP will continue to work with the Douglas County Health Department to provide information to local residents about the importance of having their wells tested for arsenic and other contaminants.