



Public Health Response in the Lower Umatilla Basin Ground Water Management Area (LUBGWMA): Informational Resources & FAQ

This document was created to support partners from Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Local Public Health Administrators (LPHAs), and other State agencies when answering common questions around initial testing and retesting of domestic wells for nitrate in the LUBGWMA. However, this resource is open to anyone who has questions or wants to learn more.

Need to contact the Oregon Health Authority's (OHA's) Domestic Wells Testing Program? Email Domestic.Wells@odhsoha.oregon.gov or call **541-952-9254**.

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Background

The groundwater in the [Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area \(LUBGWMA\)](#), which spans northern Morrow County and northwestern Umatilla County in eastern Oregon, is contaminated with high levels of [nitrate](#). Many households who rely on domestic wells for their drinking water on properties near the towns of Hermiston, Boardman, Irrigon, Stanfield, Umatilla, and Echo are impacted. This is a significant public health issue because **nitrate at levels above 10 milligrams per liter (mg/L) of water poses a health risk for people who rely on a domestic well for drinking and cooking.**

Local testing of domestic wells in 2022 found nitrate levels above the federal standard of 10 mg/L. As shared in the January 2023 Oregon Secretary of State audit, [Local Perspectives: Lower Umatilla Basin](#), many community members whose wells tested high for nitrate were previously unaware they may have been exposed to toxic drinking water for decades and had little to no information to protect themselves and their families.

In 2023, at the direction of Governor Tina Kotek, OHA and the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) began working with LPHAs in Morrow and Umatilla counties, local CBOs, and other partners to identify impacted residents, offer free well testing, provide safe water services, and facilitate the installation of treatment systems when appropriate. To date, approximately **3,300 households** who depend on domestic wells have been identified in the LUBGWMA.



Households who have already had at least one test have been divided into tiers based on the level of nitrate in their well water:

Tier 1	• 0 - 4.99 mg/L
Tier 2	• 5 - 9.99 mg/L
Tier 3	• 10 - 24.99 mg/L
Tier 4	• 25 mg/L and up

Overview of the Current LUBGWMA Testing Program

As of May 2024, OHA is reaching out to community members living in the LUBGWMA to both retest wells that were initially tested last year as well as attempt to reach community members whose wells have not yet been tested. The current phase of this work also includes ensuring water delivery and the installation of Reverse Osmosis (RO) treatment, where applicable.

OHA’s priority is to offer:

- Testing for households with domestic wells that have never been tested before
- Quarterly retesting to households with water that previously tested between 5 and 10 milligrams of nitrate per liter of water (mg/L)
- Annual retesting for wells that tested outside of those levels

The current plan for testing and retesting follows this outline:

1. Beginning May 2024: General communication on the retesting timeline is sent to households by OHA, followed by specific communication on each household’s situation
2. Residents can schedule their initial testing or retesting appointments through OHA, ODHS, by calling their local LPHA, or calling 211. **New appointments will be prioritized over retests.** Households in **Tier 2** will then be prioritized for appointment scheduling, in order to dedicate

resources to households that are most at risk of exceeding safe levels of nitrate in drinking water, or those closest to 10 mg/L at last test

3. **Residents in Tiers 1 and 4** are invited to self-sample their wells, with assistance available upon request. Sample kits to complete self-sampling can be picked up at Morrow and Umatilla County Health Department offices. ODHS has coordinated drop-off sites at local DHS offices as well as County Health Departments, and organize the transport of samples to labs
4. Once OHA receives water testing results from the lab, they will be entered into a testing database within 48-72 business hours. OHA will then generate a results letter to the household to provide additional information on the test results. If a household opted for email delivery, the letter is sent immediately, otherwise physical mail is sent once a week at minimum
5. **Residents in Tier 3** will be provided an RO treatment system by the state, including free installation and regular maintenance performed by state contractors. This includes nitrate testing to ensure the system is working. Residents in Tier 3 are encouraged to sign up for free drinking water delivery, if not doing so already

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Below you will find common questions that you may be asked, as well as example responses:

Why am I being contacted about testing or retesting the water in my domestic well?

If this is an initial test, please see our educational resources, such as [this brochure](#) or [this fact sheet](#), along with this additional information: In 2023, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) and Morrow and Umatilla Public Health Departments began coordinating a program to help residents in your area get their well water tested with the support of local community-based organizations. Many domestic wells in the area have tested high for nitrate, so it's important to get your well water tested. Nitrate in drinking water above 10 milligrams per liter (mg/L) can harm your health and is especially dangerous for formula-fed babies.



If you have tested before, and this is a follow up, the following information can be helpful to know or share: In 2023, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) and Morrow and Umatilla Public Health Departments began coordinating a program to help residents in your area get their well water tested with the support of local community-based organizations. Yours is one of over 1,900 households to date that accepted the offer of free testing of well water by a laboratory for nitrate and several other common well water contaminants.

OHA, ODHS, and your local county health departments are now offering free retesting of wells to make sure water is safe, or that treatment systems will be effective. This is important because levels of nitrate in groundwater can go up or down depending on seasonal temperatures, rainfall, and increasing nitrate contamination of the groundwater.

What is my water being tested for exactly?

While we are primarily looking for high levels of nitrate, the initial test will also look for 10 other contaminants including arsenic, lead, and bacteria like E. coli. OHA also pays for three non-health related tests that can affect the choice of water treatment system: hardness, iron, and manganese.

You will receive all your results in a letter. If there are other contaminants present in your water, you will also be sent fact sheets with more information on those contaminants.

What are the potential health impacts of drinking water with high nitrate levels?

Short-term exposure to high levels of nitrate in drinking water can be dangerous for formula-fed babies and increase risk of miscarriage for pregnant women. Long-term exposure may increase serious health risks, such as thyroid issues or cancer, for everyone. **OHA has a [one-pager in English and Spanish](#) with more information about health impacts.**

What activities are safe to do when my water has high levels of nitrate in it? Which are unsafe?

Examples of **safe activities** include bathing, washing food, doing dishes and laundry, and garden irrigation – so long as the water is not being swallowed.



Examples of **unsafe activities** include consuming the water in any form, including using it for baby formula. Do not boil water with high levels of nitrate, as this does not make it safe for drinking.



I have animals who drink from the same well as I do. Do I need to worry about their health too?

For pets: There is little research about safe amounts of nitrate for companion pet(s). The safest thing to do is offer your pet(s) treated or bottled water, especially tiny pets such as guinea pigs, hamsters, and chinchillas. Please consult your veterinarian if you have concerns about your companion pet's health.

For livestock: Please consult your veterinarian with questions about nitrates and livestock (horses, goats, cattle, etc.). A licensed veterinarian should be the initial source of information for your animal's possible health issues.

I've received my test results. What types of additional support and resources am I eligible for?

The resources offered to households are based on the level of nitrate in your water:

- **Test results from 0 mg/L - 4.99 mg/L (Tier 1):** OHA is offering households with the lowest nitrate levels the option of a free annual laboratory test through self-sampling
- **Test results from 5 mg/L - 9.99 mg/L (Tier 2):** ODHS will collect a new water sample and deliver it to laboratory for testing. They will offer to do this quarterly (every three months) until we have completed one year of testing in every season of the year, to make sure a household's well water does not go over 10 mg/L at any point in the year
- **Test results from 10 mg/L - 24.99 mg/L (Tier 3):** Residents in this category should be receiving free drinking water delivery until the installation of a free RO system. If a treatment system has already been provided by OHA, the water treatment company they have contracted with is required to maintain the systems. They will test the water when they carry out these maintenance tasks to ensure treatment systems are functioning and that the water is safe
- **Test results 25 mg/L and up (Tier 4):** Residents should be receiving free drinking water delivery that meets their household's needs. OHA is offering households with nitrate levels above 25 mg/L the option of a free annual laboratory test through self-sampling

What can I expect during the retesting period? How often will this happen?

OHA will send you a letter that includes your previous well water test results and information about which tier your household falls into. Follow the instructions outlined in the letter to access free testing or other resources.

The frequency of retesting will be based on the level of nitrate in each household’s water:

Tier 1	0 mg/L – 4.99 mg/L	Annual retesting
Tier 2	5 mg/L – 9.99 mg/L	Quarterly retesting for one year to determine seasonality
Tier 3	10 mg/L – 24.99 mg/L	Annual retesting
Tier 4	25 mg/L and above	Annual retesting

How will my water sample be collected?

Households in Tiers 1 or 4: OHA is offering households the option of a free annual laboratory test through self-sampling. If this will be a barrier for you, OHA, ODHS, or 211 can schedule someone to come take the sample instead.

Residents who choose to collect their own water sample will be provided information on where to pick up their self-sample kit, instructions for collecting the water sample, and the locations to the collection sites for sample and documentation drop off. The kit will also include a prefilled “Chain of Custody” document, which needs to be turned in with the sample.

If a resident requires assistance collecting a water sample, staff with the Office of Resilience and Emergency Management (OREM), a program within ODHS, will schedule an appointment. In this case, the pre-filled Chain of Custody document will be provided to the sample collector with the water collection bottles. OREM field staff will collect the water sample and drop it off at the drop off sample collection site.

Households in Tier 2: ODHS will be contacting you with an offer to schedule an appointment for them to collect a new water sample and deliver it to laboratory for testing. The state will offer to do this quarterly (every three months) until they have completed one year of testing in every season of the year. This is to make sure your well water does not go over 10 mg/L at any point in the year.

Households in Tier 3: Testing will be done directly by the contractors (licensed plumbers or licensed treatment installers) who either have or will install your treatment system. They will perform an initial test after installation and additional

testing after filters are changed. After testing is complete, the contractor will reach back out to discuss the results and verify that the system is working.

What is the process for retesting after the installation of a RO system?

Contractors provide post-installation testing, offer maintenance services like filter changes, and collect samples during maintenance for retesting. When samples are taken, they will be delivered to the lab by the contractor. The contractor is also responsible for reporting the results to the household.

Why hasn't an in-home water treatment system been offered to me when someone else in my community is getting one installed?

The resources offered to each household are based on the level of nitrate in your drinking water. The state is providing households with test results at **10 mg/L or more** with bottled water or, where effective, in-home water treatment systems. Treatment systems provided by the state are certified to remove nitrate up to 25 mg/L. If your test results are above that level, your household will have to depend on bottled water until other solutions are found.

I have not received my test results or a letter from OHA, and it has been more than 30 days after my sample was collected and delivered. What do I do?

If you don't receive an additional letter, email, or phone call **within 30 days of your nitrate test**, please contact OHA's Domestic Well Safety Program (Domestic.Wells@odhsaha.oregon.gov or 541-952-9254) or your county public health department. You can also contact any local community partners for additional support in reaching OHA or ODHS for scheduling or other needs.

Contact information for county public health departments:

Morrow County Public Health

(541) 256-0514

apineyro@co.morrow.or.us



Umatilla County Public Health

(541) 278-6394

health@umatillacounty.gov



Contact information for local community-based organizations that support this work:

Douglas Latinas International

Phone /Text: 971-381-4895



Eastern Oregon Center for Independent Living (EOCIL)

(541) 889-3119



Euvalcree

541-567-1185



H2OEO – Water for Eastern Oregon

info@h2oeo.org



Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides

Phone/Text: (509) 727-9361



Oregon Rural Action

(541) 975-2411

info@oregonrural.org



Where can I find more information about testing and well safety?

Residents can visit OHA's [Domestic Well Safety](#) site to learn about testing, view data, and more. To connect with an OHA staff member directly, residents are welcome to email Domestic.Wells@odhsoha.oregon.gov or call 541-952-9254.

There are additional [resources for community partners](#) from OHA available online in both English and Spanish.

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