



# Public Access to Information & Public Involvement

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SAFE DRINKING WATER ACT • CELEBRATING 25 YEARS • PROTECT OUR HEALTH FROM SOURCE TO TAP

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The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) requires that drinking water quality information be made available to the public. When SDWA was amended in 1996, numerous provisions were added that give consumers greater access to information about, and opportunities for involvement in, drinking water issues.

## Finding Out Whether Your Drinking Water Meets National Safety Standards

USEPA sets health-based standards to protect the nation's drinking water. Here are three ways to find out whether your water system is meeting these national standards:

**Consumer Confidence Reports:** Your water system is the first source for specific information about your drinking water. Starting in 1999, these water quality reports will be prepared annually by each community water system. Every customer of a community water system will have access to a report, most commonly through a direct mailing. The report will provide information on the source of your water supply, the level of any regulated contaminants detected in the water, the health effects of contaminants detected above federal health-based standards, and your water system's compliance with other drinking water regulations. All community water systems should have issued these reports by October 19, 1999, and by July 1 each year thereafter. If you have not seen your report, call your water system to obtain a copy.

**State Compliance Reports:** By July of each year, every primacy state must produce an annual report on whether water systems within the state met drinking water standards during the previous calendar year. These reports are available through your state drinking water program. Many are available via the Internet. Call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at **1-800-426-4791** to find out how to contact your state's drinking water program, or visit USEPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm) and click on your state.

**Databases:** USEPA collects information on every public drinking water system in the nation and stores it in a database called the Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS). USEPA uses this information to gauge how safe America's drinking water is, and to track water systems that are violating drinking water standards. Much of this information is available through USEPA's Envirofacts Database. You can access information about your water system, such as how many people it serves and whether it has been meeting drinking water safety standards, on the web at [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm).

## What Happens When There Is an Emergency With Your Drinking Water?

**Public Notification:** If there is an immediate threat to your health due to a violation of a drinking water regulation or standard, SDWA requires that your water system notify you promptly through the media or posted signs. It is important that you follow any instructions your water system may give you in the notice.

## Determining the Threats to Your Drinking Water

**Source Water Assessment:** Between now and 2003, states will be examining each of the nation's drinking water sources (the rivers, lakes, groundwater, etc., from which water systems take their water) to determine how susceptible they are to contamination. Through these assessments, your state and water supplier will obtain information to answer more detailed questions about the

potential threats to the quality of your drinking water. States and water systems must make the results of these assessments available to the public when they are completed. Consumer Confidence Reports will also include a summary of the status or results of these Source Water Assessments.

**Databases:** The public has access to two databases recently created by USEPA. These databases contain information on the occurrence of contaminants in drinking water, but don't identify contaminant sources. Both databases will be available on USEPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/). The Information Collection Rule Database stores information that USEPA has collected from large public water systems (those serving at least 100,000 people) on occurrences of disease-causing microbes and byproducts of disinfection processes. This information has been available since August 1999. The National Contaminant Occurrence Database stores information on the occurrences of regulated and unregulated contaminants in drinking water throughout the country.

## **Actions That Are Being Taken to Protect Your Drinking Water and How You Can Get Involved**

USEPA, states, and water systems each work to protect the nation's drinking water supply. Opportunities for public involvement exist at all of these levels.

### **At the Federal Level**

USEPA activities to protect drinking water include setting drinking water standards and overseeing the work of states that enforce federal, or their own, stricter, standards. USEPA holds many public meetings on issues ranging from proposed drinking water standards to the development of databases. You can also comment on proposed regulations and drafts of other upcoming USEPA documents. A list of public meetings and regulations that are open for comment can be found on USEPA's drinking water web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/pubinput.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/pubinput.html) or from the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at **1-800-426-4791**.

### **At the State Level**

SDWA gives states flexibility in implementing drinking water protection efforts so that they can meet the specific needs of their citizens while maintaining a

national level of public health. States are required to seek public input on many of their activities including those highlighted below. To find out whom to contact in your state about any of these activities, call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at **1-800-426-4791** or visit USEPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm) and click on your state.

### **The Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF):**

This federal grant program provides money for states, who, in turn, provide loans to drinking water systems to upgrade their facilities and ensure compliance with drinking water standards. Each year, your state develops and seeks public comment on an Intended Use Plan that describes how it intends to use its grant to fund projects to upgrade treatment facilities. This final list is made available to the public. Also, a portion of your state's DWSRF grant can be set aside specifically for acquiring land to help protect your drinking water source or to fund other local protection activities. Contact your state agency to find out if and how your state plans to use these set-aside funds.

**Source Water Assessments:** As noted above, states are implementing programs to assess and protect all sources of public drinking water. States developed these programs in cooperation with citizen advisory committees made up of representatives of public constituencies. Individuals can also help the state, local government, or water system to complete drinking water source assessments. This may include helping your state inventory the potential pollution threats to your drinking water sources.

**Capacity Development Program:** By October 2000, states must develop strategies to ensure that all water systems have the technical, financial, and managerial capability to ensure that safe drinking water is provided to their customers. States must involve the public in the development of these strategies, and make the final strategy available to the public.

**Operator Certification Program:** SDWA established new requirements for certification of the people that operate public water systems. To meet the new requirements, states must resubmit their current certification programs to USEPA by August 2000 or submit revised program changes to USEPA by February 2001. States must include ongoing stakeholder involvement in the revision of operator certification programs, and USEPA's guidelines strongly recommend that states use stakeholder boards or advisory committees to help implement these programs. Call your state to find out

how you can provide input as your state revises and implements its program.

### **At the Local and Water System Level**

There are a number of ways that consumers can obtain information about their water system at the local level and find out how to assist in ensuring safe drinking water.

**Consumer Confidence Reports:** By late October 1999, all community water systems were supposed to provide their first Consumer Confidence Reports (also called drinking water quality reports) to the public. Beginning in 2000, water suppliers must provide their annual reports to the public by July of each year. These reports contain information on the condition of the drinking water and opportunities for public involvement and can spark a dialogue between the water supplier and its customers. Having this information allows you to better understand and participate in decisions by your water system regarding treatment improvements and protection efforts.

**Source Water Protection:** Protection of drinking water is everyone's responsibility. You can help protect your community's drinking water source in several ways. As noted above, you can work with your state and/or water utility during the assessment of your drinking water source. You can also work with them to periodically update the assessment to include any land use changes that may occur over time. You can also work with your water supplier, local government, an existing community watershed group, or start your own community group to create a broader source water protection program. If your community already has source water protection or wellhead protection programs in place, you can contact your water supplier, local government, or watershed groups for information on how to participate in or to improve these protection programs. Remember that funding for community protection activities may be available

through the DWSRF and other federal or state grant or loan programs.

USEPA has created several publications that help communities develop and implement drinking water protection programs. They can be ordered through USEPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline (**1-800-426-4791**) and are also available on the web at [www.epa.gov/safewater/Pubs/new/pipdws.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/Pubs/new/pipdws.html).

### **Where You Can Go For More Drinking Water Information**

If you are interested in more information about drinking water, USEPA maintains a Safe Drinking Water Hotline and a web site. Other partner organizations also have information available (see Resource Fact Sheet).

**Telephone Hotline:** USEPA operates the Safe Drinking Water Hotline (**1-800-426-4791** or [www.epa.gov/safewater/drinklink.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/drinklink.html)) that can answer questions about the regulations and programs developed under SDWA, and provide federal and state contacts for specific information. It can also provide information on other drinking water publications.

**Internet:** USEPA's drinking water web site ([www.epa.gov/safewater](http://www.epa.gov/safewater)) provides information on USEPA's implementation of SDWA, the contaminants regulated under SDWA, educational activities and publications on drinking water, links to state programs and other drinking water web sites, and much more.

**For more information on your watershed, see:** [www.epa.gov/surf/](http://www.epa.gov/surf/). This web site includes watershed maps, local and national information about watershed impairment, information about local protection and volunteer opportunities, and links to other web sites of interest.

