



# Public Access to Information & Public Involvement



SAFE DRINKING WATER ACT • 1974-2004 • PROTECT OUR HEALTH FROM SOURCE TO TAP

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

US EPA 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. Since 1999, each community water system is required to prepare a water quality report annually. 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 must issue these reports by July 1 each year. 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 US EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo) and click on your state.

**Databases:** US EPA 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). US EPA 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 US EPA'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](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo).

## 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:** States examined 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 have obtained 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. 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 US EPA. These databases contain information on the occurrence of contaminants in drinking water, but don't identify contaminant sources. Both databases are available on US EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/databases.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/databases.html). The Information Collection Rule Database stores information that US EPA 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**

US EPA, 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**

US EPA activities to protect drinking water include setting drinking water standards and overseeing the work of states that enforce federal, or their own, stricter, standards. US EPA 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 US EPA documents. A list of public meetings and regulations that are open for comment can be found on US EPA'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 US EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo) 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:** In accordance with the Safe Drinking Water Act, states developed and are implementing EPA-approved strategies to ensure that water systems acquire and maintain the technical, managerial, and financial capability to ensure that safe drinking water is provided to their customers. States continue to involve stakeholders in the implementation of their strategies.



**Operator Certification Program:** In accordance with the Safe Drinking Water Act, US EPA issued guidelines in February 1999 specifying minimum standards for the certification and recertification of the operators of community and non-transient, noncommunity water systems. These guidelines apply to state Operator Certification Programs. All states are currently implementing EPA-approved operator certification programs, which include ongoing stakeholder involvement. Contact your state for more information.

### **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:** In October 1999, all community water systems provided their first Consumer Confidence Reports (also called annual drinking water quality reports) to the public. Today, community water systems are required to provide their consumers with these annual reports by July 1st of each year. The reports tell where drinking water comes from, what's in it, and how consumers can protect their water source. These reports also provide opportunities for public involvement which can spark dialogue between the water supplier and its customers. The information contained in these reports provides relevant information about their drinking water quality allowing the consumers to make informed choices and to better participate in decisions pertaining to improving treatment, bill increases, and drinking water 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.

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

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

If you are interested in more information about drinking water, US EPA maintains a Safe Drinking Water Hotline and a web site.

**Telephone Hotline:** US EPA operates the Safe Drinking Water Hotline (1-800-426-4791) 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:** US EPA's drinking water web site ([www.epa.gov/safewater](http://www.epa.gov/safewater)) provides information on US EPA'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.