

United States  
Environmental Protection  
Agency

Office of Water (4606)  
Washington, DC 20460  
EPA-810-K-99-002



# It's YOUR Drinking Water:

*Get to Know it  
and Protect it!*

**How the right-to-know provisions of the  
Safe Drinking Water Act can help you learn  
about and protect your drinking water.**

# The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA)

*requires that information be made available to the public so that you can learn how to help protect your drinking water and make personal health decisions about it.*

*SDWA is the principal Federal statute that protects the 250 million Americans who drink water from public supplies. 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. This guide will help you take advantage of these opportunities and find answers to many of your questions about your drinking water.*



## FINDING OUT WHETHER YOUR DRINKING WATER MEETS NATIONAL SAFETY STANDARDS:

EPA sets health-based standards to protect the nation's drinking water from unsafe amounts of contaminants. The standards are part of SDWA's "multiple barrier" approach to protecting drinking water as it travels from its source to your tap. In most cases, EPA delegates responsibility for ensuring that the health standards are met to states. You can find out whether your water system is meeting national standards through several sources:

- **Consumer Confidence Report:** 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 the safety limit, and your water system's compliance with other drinking water regulations. The report will also tell you where else you can go for information about your local drinking water supply. If you haven't received a report by the end of October 1999, call your water system to obtain a copy.



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

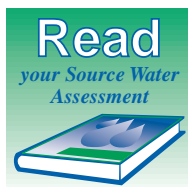


- **Database:** EPA collects information on every public drinking water system in the nation and stores it in a database called the Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS). EPA uses this information to gauge how safe America's drinking water is, and to track water systems which are violating drinking water standards. 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 Internet at: [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm)



## **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 derive their water) to determine how susceptible they are to contamination. States must make the results of these assessments available to the public when they are completed. Call your state drinking water office or local water system to get a copy of the workplan and eventually the assessment. Through these assessments, your state and water supplier will obtain information to answer your more detailed questions about the potential threats to the quality of your drinking water. These assessments may need to be updated in the future to maintain accuracy if land use or other changes occur in the watershed. Consumer confidence reports will include a summary of the Source Water Assessments once done, and may include more information on threats.



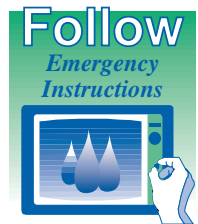
- **Databases:** The public will also have access to two databases being created to assist EPA in its decision making about which contaminants to regulate in the future and which standards for regulated contaminants to re-examine. These databases contain information on the occurrence of contaminants in drinking water, but don't identify contaminant sources. Both databases will be available on EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/).



- ⇒ The *Information Collection Rule Database* will store information that EPA has collected from large public water systems (those serving at least 100,000 people) on occurrences of contamination from disease-causing microbes and byproducts of disinfection. This information will be available in August 1999.
- ⇒ The *National Contaminant Occurrence Database* being developed by EPA will store information on the occurrences of regulated and unregulated contaminants in drinking water throughout the country. The information will be available in August 1999.

## **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.



## **ACTIONS THAT ARE BEING TAKEN TO PROTECT YOUR DRINKING WATER AND HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED:**

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:*

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. EPA is committed to seeking public input as it develops new drinking water standards and other requirements of the drinking water program.



**Public Meetings and Comment.** EPA holds many public meetings on issues ranging from a proposed drinking water standard for arsenic to the development of the National Contaminant Occurrence Database. You can also comment on proposed regulations and drafts of other upcoming EPA activities. A list of public meetings and regulations that are open for comment can be found on EPA's drinking water web site at [www.epa.gov/safewater/pubinput.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/pubinput.html) or you can call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at (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 the activities listed below. To **find out whom to contact in your state** about any of these activities, call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at (800) 426-4791 or visit EPA'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 an intended use plan for how it intends to use its grant, including a list of water systems that will be receiving funds to upgrade their treatment facilities. This list is available to the public, and your state is required to seek public input in the development of the intended use plan.

**Source Water Assessments.** States have developed and are implementing programs to assess and protect all sources of public drinking water. States have also established citizen advisory committees to help develop their programs, and may continue to seek input as they conduct assessments between now and 2003. You can help implement your source water assessment program by assisting your state (or your local government or water system if the state delegates the responsibility) as it conducts your drinking water source assessment. This may include helping your state inventory the potential pollution threats to your drinking water source. Also, a portion of your state's federal grant money from the DWSRF can be set aside specifically for acquiring land to buffer your drinking water source or to fund local protection activities. You can contact your state agency to find out if and how your state plans to use these set-aside funds.



**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 are required to involve the public in the development of these strategies, and to make the final strategy available to the public.



**Operator Certification Program.** Some states are currently revising their existing programs to certify operators of public water systems to meet new requirements. These states are required to submit their program changes to EPA by February 2001. States whose current programs already meet the new requirements must resubmit their programs to EPA by August 2000. EPA guidelines require states to include ongoing stakeholder involvement in the revision of operator certification programs. EPA'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:*

**Consumer Confidence Reports.** Your water system is the first source for specific information about your drinking water. By late October 1999, your water supplier must make its first consumer confidence report (also called a drinking water quality report) available to the public. Beginning in 2000, water suppliers must provide their annual report to the public by July. The information contained in these reports on the condition of the drinking water and opportunities for public involvement can spark a dialogue between the water supplier and its customers. You can also ask your water supplier for more information beyond the report. Having this information will allow 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. For example, your state may delegate the responsibility to conduct the assessment of your drinking water source to your local government or water supplier. If this is the case, you can help your local government or water supplier as it creates an inventory of potential pollution threats to the source of your drinking water. You can also work with them to periodically update the assessment to include any land use changes that may occur over time.



You can work with your water supplier, local government, an existing community watershed group, or start your own community group and use the information gathered through the assessment to create or improve a broader source water protection program. Some communities that get their water from ground water wells already have drinking water protection programs, called wellhead protection programs, where pollution prevention measures are being implemented. If you live in such a community, you can contact your water supplier or local government for information on how to participate in the wellhead protection program. Again, there is funding available through the DWSRF for community protection activities.

EPA has created several publications that help communities develop and implement drinking water protection programs. They can be ordered through EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline [1-800-426-4791] and are also available on the Internet 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:

- **Hotline:** EPA operates the Safe Drinking Water Hotline [1-800-426-4791], which can answer questions about the regulations and programs developed under the Safe Drinking Water Act, and provide federal and state contacts for specific information. It can also provide information on drinking water publications.



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

