

## **Drinking Water Public Notification**

*Public notification helps to ensure that consumers will always know if there is a problem with their drinking water. These notices immediately alert consumers if there is a serious problem with their drinking water (e.g., a boil water emergency). For less serious problems (e.g., a missed water test), water suppliers must notify consumers in a timely manner. Public notice requirements have always been a part of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA); EPA recently changed these requirements to make them even more effective.*

Water suppliers across the United States consistently deliver drinking water that meets EPA and state standards. Systems also test regularly for approximately 90 contaminants to make sure that no contaminant is present at levels which may pose a risk to human health. Water suppliers serving the same customers year-round summarize this information in an annual report which provides consumers with a snapshot of their everyday water quality.

Unfortunately, water quality can sometimes change. Despite the efforts of water suppliers, problems with drinking water can and do occur. When a problem with drinking water happens, the people who drink the water have a right to know what happened and what they need to do. The public notice requirements of the Safe Drinking Water Act require water suppliers to provide this notice.

As water suppliers test their water, they may discover that levels of certain contaminants are higher than the standards set by EPA or states. This might happen due to a change in local water conditions, heavy rainstorms, or an accidental spill of a hazardous substance. Water suppliers may also fail to take one or a series of their required samples. Any time a water supplier fails to meet all EPA and state standards for drinking water (including missing

### **Public notification changes**

*EPA published revised public notification regulations on May 4, 2000 (65 FR 25981), as required by the 1996 SDWA Amendments. These changes make notification easier and more effective for:*

**Consumers – Faster notice in emergencies, fewer notices overall, notices that are easier to understand and better targeted to health risks.**

The new public notice requirements direct water suppliers to let people know within 24 hours of any situation that may immediately pose a health risk. Formerly, water systems had up to 72 hours to provide this notice. This change will make it easier for consumers to avoid drinking contaminated water. Water suppliers can now also combine notices for less serious problems, and make notices shorter and easier to read.

**States & water systems – concise standard language and notices.**

The new public notification requirements make the standard health effects language more concise. The new rule also gives water systems a standard set of procedures to follow, to make notices easier for water systems to issue, while providing better information for consumers.

required samples or taking them late), the water supplier must inform the people who drink the water.

**How quickly do water systems have to send notices?** Depending on the severity of the situation, water suppliers have from 24 hours to one year to notify their customers after a violation occurs. EPA specifies three categories, or tiers, of public notification. Depending on what tier a violation situation falls into, water systems have different amounts of time to distribute the notice and different ways to deliver the notice:

- **Immediate Notice (Tier 1):** Any time a situation occurs where there is the potential for human health to be immediately impacted, water suppliers have 24 hours to notify people who may drink the water of the situation. Water suppliers must use media outlets such as television, radio, and newspapers, post their notice in public places, or personally deliver a notice to their customers in these situations.
- **Notice as soon as possible (Tier 2):** Any time a water system provides water with levels of a contaminant that exceed EPA or state standards or that hasn't been treated properly, but that doesn't pose an immediate risk to human health, the water system must notify its customers as soon as possible, but within 30 days of the violation. Notice may be provided via the media, posting, or through the mail.
- **Annual Notice (Tier 3):** When water systems violate a drinking water standard that does not have a direct impact on human health (for example, failing to take a required sample on time) the water supplier has up to a year to provide a notice of this situation to its customers. The extra time gives water suppliers the opportunity to consolidate these notices and send them with annual water quality reports (consumer confidence reports).

**What information must be included in a notice?** All notices must include:

- A description of the violation that occurred, including the potential health effects
- The population at risk and if alternate water supplies need to be used
- What the water system is doing to correct the problem
- Actions consumers can take
- When the violation occurred and when the system expects it to be resolved
- How to contact the water system for more information
- Language encouraging broader distribution of the notice

**How often do violations occur that require a public notice?** Serious water quality problems are rare. Approximately 25 percent of the nation's 170,000 public water suppliers violate at least one drinking water standard every year and are required to provide public notice. In fiscal year 1998, there were more than 124,000 of these violations. Ninety percent of these violations are due to the failure of water systems to complete all sampling in a timely manner. About one percent of the time, water systems incur a violation for a serious situation where notification must be provided immediately (Tier 1).

*For more information on drinking water, please call EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791 or visit [www.epa.gov/safewater/pn.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/pn.html).*