

## Our View: Drinking-water contamination

# Be neighborly — test your private well

People with private wells are often quite proud of their ability to provide themselves with drinking water without interference from government or private water companies.

Other than the cost of drilling the well and the cost of electricity to power the pump, their water costs them little. Unless they are selling or renting their property, there is no requirement for them to test their wells. It's almost a pioneer thing. Dig a deep hole in the backyard, and you have all the water you could need.

Except in New Jersey, 12.5 percent of private wells have been found to be contaminated. Considering that there are some 400,000 private wells in the state, that amounts to approximately 50,000 wells that may exceed health standards for radiation, bacteria, volatile-organic chemicals, nitrates, lead or other contaminants.

Folks, if you have a private well, get it tested — annually.

The latest Department of Environmental Protection data come

from tests performed on 51,000 wells from 2002 to 2007 under the New Jersey Private Well Testing Act, which requires wells be tested when a property changes hands or has a new tenant.

The DEP routinely notifies local health departments when a contaminated well is discovered under the Private Well Testing Act, and those local health departments routinely notify nearby residents, says Atlantic County Health Officer Pat Diamond.

But the law, which took effect in 2002, is an imperfect system for tracking contaminated wells. It doesn't require, or fund, the local notification process. And it does nothing to protect the family that has been living in the same house for 25 years, drinking from wells that may have never been tested for modern contaminants. (These are the very people most at risk of suffering real consequences from these contaminants.)

And 50,000 possibly contaminated wells throughout New Jersey are a *public*-health issue,

not just a private issue for the individual well owner. Other people in an area have a need to know that a neighbor's well is contaminated and that, therefore, their own well might be dangerous, too.

Sharon Schulman, the director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy and a water-policy expert, has suggested requiring owners of private wells to pay \$50 a year to register with the state, which would allow the DEP to keep track of private wells. Every third year, the fee would be waived and well owners would be required to test their wells at their own expense, under Schulman's plan.

It's a good idea — but one unlikely to ever be approved. Those 400,000 private-well owners would make a lot of noise in Trenton about losing their independence and freedom.

But with freedom comes responsibility. If you have a private well, get it tested regularly. If nothing else, it's the neighborly thing to do.

## Talking Points



**"This can't be a New Testament campaign, turning the other cheek. This has to be an Old Testament campaign."**

Former N.J. Gov. Jim Florio, saying that Barack Obama must fight back against Republican attack ads with an eye-for-an-eye strategy

**"They made it loud and clear they have the 500-pound hammer in their hand. It's like gambling with professional poker players. You're almost always better off negotiating than getting into a fight."**

Tom Gill, owner of Tackle Direct in Ocean City, one of the properties the state needs for the Route 52 causeway project



**"Today I'm contributing \$220,000 as my first installment in a \$1 million plan for the educational scholarship fund of Whitesboro. Keep dreaming ladies and gentlemen, keep dreaming."**

Oprah Winfrey, announcing a \$1 million gift to the people of Whitesboro, the Middle Township community where her boyfriend, Stedman Graham, was born

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