

New Water Quality Database Frightening and Misleading Tap Water Customers

By Jeffrey Lawson, Engineer, Florida Rural Water Association

Recently, many news organizations nationwide published an article warning the public of “dozens of harmful contaminants in our tap water,” and encourages readers to “see exactly which ones you’re guzzling down.” Their source for this information...an online database developed by the Environmental Working Group or EWG (www.ewg.org/tapwater). This database allows members of the general public to search water quality data by zip code. After receiving concerned calls and emails regarding tap water quality, Florida Rural Water Association (FRWA) decided to look deeper into the EWG’s tap water database and report. FRWA randomly selected 6 public water systems, one from each of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s (FDEP) 6 regulatory districts, and compared the data reported by EWG with the compliance monitoring data the water systems submitted to FDEP. Here is a breakdown of what we learned:

- The EWG provides ‘health guidelines’ for each contaminant discussed in their report. The report then compares the level detected by the water system to that guideline and, for some contaminants, the legal limit. These legal limits are established by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The health guidelines cited by EWG are taken from a variety of sources and literature, some of which are still in a DRAFT stage. The majority appeared to come from the State of California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, although some were taken from EPA health advisories. NONE of these guidelines carry any legal weight. Furthermore, these guidelines mislead, and unnecessarily frighten customers as they are significantly lower (in one case 100 times lower) than the legal limits.
- EPA has a program in where they require some water systems to monitor for chemicals they think might be in the water, but that are not currently regulated. This program is known as the Unregulated contaminants Monitoring Rule, or UCMR. EPA uses UCMR to collect data on chemicals that are suspected to be present in drinking water and for which no health-based standards have been set under the Safe Drinking Water Act. Data from EPA’s most recent Unregulated Contaminants Monitoring Rule was also included in the EWG database. Nothing monitored under the most recent UCMR rule is currently regulated, and most, if not all, will never be regulated. UCMR is intended to be the FIRST STEP in answering the question “Is there anything we don’t know about in the water supply, and if so, what needs to be done about it?” It is intended to be an informational tool for regulators, not a compliance tool.
- Compliance for two types of disinfection byproducts, trihalomethanes and haloacetic acids, is based on an annual average of the monitoring data from each sampling site. So, if a water system has 10 sampling sites, then the annual average from all 10 sites has to be below the legal limit for the system to be in compliance with the rules. EWG did not report this annual average in its database, but took the average of all data from all the monitoring sites for that year. This would not give an accurate picture of the overall compliance or health of the water.
- For the water systems FRWA looked at, even when the data reported was below the EWG’s health guideline it was still discussed as if the data was above the guideline and of serious concern.

WANT TO FILTER THESE CONTAMINANTS OUT?

Screen capture from a page discussing one of the systems mentioned in the report.

- Every water system page FRWA looked at contained links that, when clicked, redirected readers to lists of filters claiming to remove the contaminants readers are told they are consuming. The site also allows readers to “Buy from Amazon and support EWG.”

The New York Daily News article on the EWG database acknowledges that “EWG recommends using filters” to “get out most of the contaminants.” However, what is not mentioned is that the EWG website appears to indicate that they benefit financially from the sale of water filters. This raises the question of whether at some level, the EWG’s report and database is designed to scare citizens into buying filters through their website as a way to increase their funding.

Buy from Amazon and support EWG.

Screen capture from a filter posted for sale on the EWG site.

FRWA’s advice to those public water systems and their customers who choose to look up their data in the EWG database is to not let yourself be frightened. While the data may be discussed in a misleading way, the numbers themselves are, for the most part, accurate. Customers should not, however, simply take the database at face value. FRWA encourages the public to contact their PWS and request a copy of the system’s latest consumer confidence report. The Consumer Confidence Report is an annual report EPA and FDEP requires water systems to send to their customers on the system’s water quality and any rule violations the water system incurred the previous year. Alternatively, FDEP posts the monitoring data for the last 3 calendar years in spreadsheets on their website which we list below. It is worth remembering that a PWS’ compliance is based on complying with the EPA-Established legal limits (in Florida these legal limits are enforced by FDEP), not arbitrary health guidelines and that any time a water system violates a legal limit they are required to notify their customers, describe any possible health effects, and how they addressed the problem. FRWA staff are always available and willing to provide information on drinking water regulations, water quality, system maintenance and improvements, and funding. FRWA can be contacted through our website at www.frwa.net or by calling (850)668-2746.

FDEP Drinking Water Data Website: <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/drinkingwater/download.htm>

About the Author: Jeffrey Lawson is one of the staff engineers employed by Florida Rural Water Association. Jeffrey holds a BS in Chemical Engineering from Florida State University. Prior to joining FRWA, Jeffrey worked

for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection for 8 years. He most recently served as the Administrator for their Drinking Water and Aquifer Protection Program.