

Environmental Working Group blames EPA for standards neglect

While discussing the topic of my next article with Elmer, I couldn't help but notice that he wrinkled his brow and sighed a bit when I mentioned the name Environmental Working Group (EWG). His reply was, "Well, sometimes they seem to mix up monitoring violations with real quality concerns. They are also the group that publishes a database of farm subsidies paid to farmers."

My interest was perked. According to their Web site, the EWG is a non-profit organization that investigates and posts environmental related issues that affect society. According to the group's Web site:

"Environmental investigations have been our specialty at the Environmental Working Group since 1993.



Pete Koenig
KAN STEP/Mapping Tech

Our research brings to light unsettling facts that you have a right to know. It shames and shakes up polluters and their lobbyists. It rattles politicians and shapes policy. It persuades bureaucracies to rethink science and strengthen regulation. It provides practical information you can use to protect your family and community.

And because our investigations and interactive Web sites tend to make news, you've probably heard about them. Even if you've never heard of us.

Which is fine. We'd rather you remember our work than our name."

I am not writing about the group itself, but instead about one of the studies the group has conducted and the results of that study: "drinking water quality."

First, a little background as to why this is of interest to me:

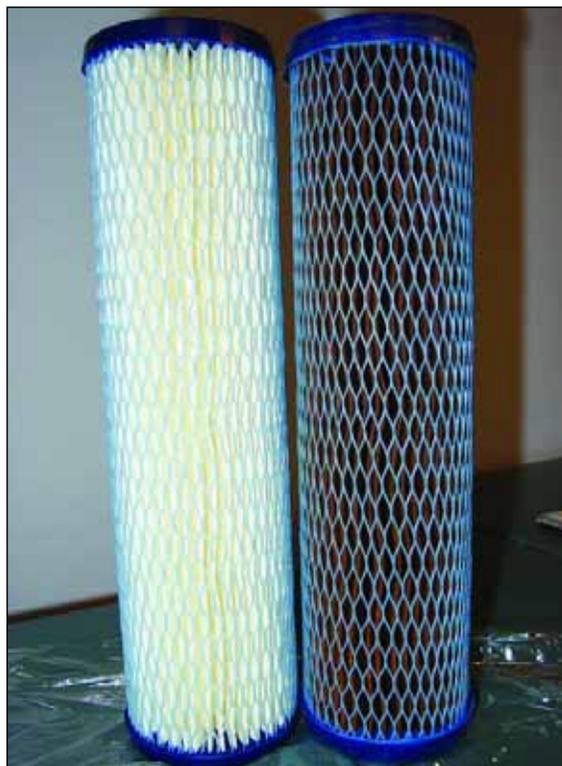
Prior to working with KRWA, I was employed by a backhoe and trenching company in Seneca, Kan. While working as an operator/laborer, I was involved with exposing and/or repairing numerous public water supply system pipelines of varying sizes in northeast Kansas. I have seen first hand the amount of deposits in some of those pipelines.

This summer, while re-plumbing our house, I decided to install a simple water filter system to attempt to reduce the amount of particulates in the water and the taste of chlorine that was coming in through the service line. After several months use, I know that the pre-filter in this system needs to be changed quite often due to 'plugging.' I have always wondered what the brown, slimy looking film on this filter is and have always been concerned that it was coming into our home. I am convinced, without testing, that the brown deposit is iron and manganese deposits from the RWD (of which I am a board member). But I'm still concerned about what else may be in my

Home water system filter at the right is "plugged" with iron and manganese.

drinking water. I have every confidence that the RWD that supplies the water is in compliance with every regulation set by KDHE and the EPA for water quality, however, I wonder about the contaminants that are **not** regulated.

I live in an area where the major industry is agriculture and understand, through first hand accounts from friend and family, that a farmer cannot generally make a living without the application of commercial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides to grow their crops. I am well aware that 'Mother Earth's' ability to filter these and other such chemicals is astounding and is superior to any commercial invention. However, when is enough, enough? Has the ground surrounding the well sites of my water supplier become saturated



accountability that their jobs include.

How much money is needed to maintain the standards in force today is also estimated by the EWG. They also state that Americans don't trust today's tap water. The bottled water industry is a \$10 billion a year industry, thereby making the assumption that Americans are paying twice for their water, once at the tap and once in a bottle. The report recommends this:

"The cost of treating water is high and will only increase if current policies continue. According to the EPA, the nation's water utilities will need an estimated \$53 billion in investments for water treatment over the next 20 years, to meet safety standards for water polluted with the chemicals that EPA has failed to control upstream (EPA 2005e). This investment is not designed to vastly improve tap water quality – it's set to ensure that water suppliers can continue to meet current standards."

The cost estimated to maintain current quality of water at today's economic status can only be expected to increase as time passes. Today's dollar cannot be expected to buy tomorrow's bread . . . or water, as it may be. Therefore, what amount will actually be required to maintain today's standards? The report does not state if it takes any disasters or devastations into account when deriving a figure of \$53 billion. If the regulations change and the requirements to remove other currently non-regulated contaminants through unconventional, costly procedures are enforced, how much extra is that going to cost the American consumer?

It appears that one of the problems is that industry is producing new chemicals faster than EPA can develop health-based limits.

"For 64 of the unregulated contaminants found in tap water, the government has not yet recommended unenforceable,

health-based limits in tap water, let alone set an enforceable safety standard. For 46 of these chemicals, no health information whatsoever is available in standard government and academic references."

Should industry be held accountable for problems that arise from health issues relating to contaminants it is polluting our environment with? I think so. However, major industry spends millions of dollars a year lobbying against regulations on byproducts of production. It would seem that their biggest defense is "...but it's not above the Maximum Contaminant Level." Well, if there is no MCL for a given toxin, shouldn't one be developed? My personal opinion is that industry should pay for the testing to determine what the MCL of a chemical is, and that the EPA should not allow for that chemical to be utilized in industry until there is an accurate and unbiased MCL standard. I say "unbiased" because it would not make sense to have

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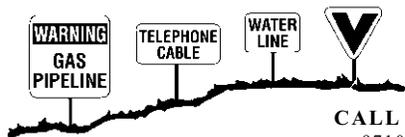
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the industry or manufacturer of a specific chemical conduct the testing that could subsequently reduce or eliminate the production of that chemical. There could be the possibility of tampering with results if any interested party did the testing. So, developing an MCL for known toxins should be a priority for the EPA and is coincidentally one of the recommendations set forth by the EWG's study:

"EPA should study the health impacts of all water disinfection by-products, and require monitoring and toxicity testing sufficient to support a human health risk assessment for these compounds."

EWG gives this further opinion: *"EPA should set health-protective standards for chemicals that are currently unregulated, but present in tap water. EPA should greatly expand requirements for testing unregulated contaminants. EPA and Congress should provide support for utilities to get that testing done."*

One of the sharpest double-edged swords in today's society is the statement "I didn't know." While ignorance can at times be a warm security blanket that gets a teenager out of a minor traffic ticket, it can also be the dagger that sends a loved one to the hospital with major afflictions:

"Of the 141 unregulated contaminants utilities detected in water supplies between 1998 and 2003, 52 are linked to cancer; 41 to reproductive toxicity, 36 to developmental toxicity, and 16 to immune system damage, according to chemical listings in seven standard government and industry toxicity references. Despite the potential health risks, any concentration of these chemicals in tap water is legal, no matter how high."

If there is documentation that certain contaminants are known to

directly or indirectly contribute to any of the above-mentioned diseases or complications, shouldn't the governing body be concerned with their regulation? In this case, ignorance is not bliss. For



EWG recommends that Congress fund additional source water protection programs such as conservation buffers.

the Washington lobbyist who is aware of these toxins and can afford bottled or distilled water for his family, the information is a warning and can be heeded. But for

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the 'unimportant' and uneducated laborer in northeastern Kansas who relies on someone else to supply his family with inexpensive water, this warning never appears. It is for those who have a job that puts them in direct contact with this information or for those who have the inclination and time to research the results. Most Americans are too preoccupied with what's going on this weekend, or when their child's next basketball game is or how to make enough money this week to afford food. Water is always supposed to be there...just open the faucet. And there it is! But making sure that water is helpful, not harmful should be paramount for today's governmental bodies.

The EWG seems to stand behind utilities and states and agrees that they are doing what they can to provide consumers with 'good' water. They seem to disagree, however, that government is doing everything it should to specify the definition of 'good'. The EWG would like to see more

regulations developed for contaminants that are potentially harmful for consumers. These regulations, although a hassle, could be the difference between a healthy society vs. what appears to be one of increased obesity, diabetes and cancer. They ask for the finances to be directed into the hands of those who can make a difference protecting this natural resource and educating consumers about the risks accompanying ingestion of such chemicals:

"Congress and EPA should support utilities and states in efforts to protect source waters. Source water protection programs should be significantly expanded, including efforts to prevent or reduce pollution to source waters, and efforts to conserve land in buffer zones around tap water supplies. Financial support for these efforts is crucial.

We strongly urge that federal laws and policies be reformed to ensure that vulnerable populations, including pregnant women and

children, are protected from chemicals. We urge that to the maximum extent possible, exposures to industrial chemicals in tap water during sensitive times in life, including in utero, be eliminated. The sooner society takes action, the sooner we can provide tap water that is safe for everyone."

These and the other recommendations made by the EWG do not seem to be unreasonable in their request. It seems that Kansas Rural Water Association members strive to do everything in their power to adhere to the requirements set forth by governing bodies. Nation wide, 90% of today's water utilities are compliant with enforceable health standards. But, these standards are set by individuals who are not going to be around in 100 years to see the effects of possible contamination. Not only contamination to the environment and water supplies, but human contamination as well. Will people 100 years from now be as healthy as those people living today? Or, will they be more dependent on supplemental means of 'health' than those of us living in today's society? Will there be some drug that cleanses the system of all the toxins ingested throughout one's life in order to let that person avoid developing a disease? For our future's sake, I hope so. But, for now, we already have that drug. It is one that most people take for granted. It is supposed to be at our disposal and at reasonable charge. It just may need to be cleaned up a bit. I hope we all work to protect "our" water.



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