

Times Digest

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FROM THE PAGES OF *The New York Times*

Midnight

Millions in U.S. Drinking Dirty Water

More than 20 percent of the nation's water treatment systems have violated key provisions of the Safe Drinking Water Act over the last five years, according to a New York Times analysis of federal data.

That law requires communities to deliver safe tap water to local residents. But since 2004, the water provided to more than 49 million people has contained illegal concentrations of chemicals like arsenic or radioactive substances like uranium, as well as dangerous bacteria often found in sewage.

Regulators were informed of each of those violations as they occurred. But regulatory records show that fewer than 6 percent of the water systems that broke the law were ever fined or punished by state or federal officials, including those at the Environmental Protection Agency, which has ultimate responsibility for enforcing standards.

Studies indicate that drinking water contaminants are linked to millions of instances of illness within the United States each year.

In some instances, drinking water violations were one-time events, and probably posed little

risk. But for hundreds of other systems, illegal contamination persisted for years, records show.

On Tuesday, the Senate Environment and Public Works committee will question a high-ranking E.P.A. official about the agency's enforcement of drinking-water safety laws. The E.P.A. is expected to announce a new policy for how it polices the nation's 54,700 water systems.

"This administration has made it clear that clean water is a top priority," said an E.P.A. spokeswoman, Adora Andy, in response to questions regarding the agency's drinking water enforcement. The E.P.A. administrator, Lisa P. Jackson, this year announced a wide-ranging overhaul of enforcement of the Clean Water Act, which regulates pollution into waterways.

"The previous eight years provide a perfect example of what happens when political leadership fails to act to protect our health and the environment," Andy added.

Water pollution has become a growing concern for some lawmakers as government oversight of polluters has waned. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., in 2007 asked the E.P.A. for data on Americans'

exposure to some contaminants in drinking water.

The New York Times has compiled and analyzed millions of records from water systems and regulators around the nation, as part of a series of articles about worsening pollution in American waters.

An analysis of E.P.A. data shows that Safe Drinking Water Act violations have occurred in parts of every state. In Ramsey, N.J., for instance, drinking water tests since 2004 have detected illegal concentrations of arsenic, a carcinogen, and the dry cleaning solvent tetrachloroethylene, which has also been linked to cancer.

In New York state, 205 water systems have broken the law by delivering tap water that contained illegal amounts of bacteria since 2004.

However, almost none of those systems were ever punished. Ramsey was not fined for its water violations, for example, though a Ramsey official said that filtration systems have been installed since then. In New York, only three water systems were penalized for bacteria violations, according to federal data.

CHARLES DUHIGG

Water Concerns Raised by Natural Gas Boom

DIMOCK, Pa. — Victoria Switzer dreamed of a peaceful retirement in these Appalachian hills. Instead, she is coping with a big hassle after a nearby natural gas well contaminated her family's drinking water with high levels of methane.

Through no design of hers, Switzer has joined a rising chorus of voices skeptical of the nation's latest energy push.

"It's been 'drill, baby, drill' out here," Switzer said bitterly. "There is no stopping this train."

Across vast regions of the country, gas companies are using a technology called hydraulic fracturing to produce natural gas from previously untapped beds of shale. The push has been so successful that the country's potential gas reserves jumped by 35 percent in two years. The new supplies have driven down natural gas prices for consumers and might help the global environment by allowing more production of electricity from natural gas, which creates fewer global

warming emissions than coal.

What the drilling push will do to local environments is another matter.

The drilling boom is raising concern in many parts of the country, and the reaction is creating political obstacles for the gas industry. Hazards like methane contamination of drinking water wells, long known in regions where gas production was common, are spreading to populous areas that have little history of coping with such risks, but happen to sit atop shale beds.

And a more worrisome possibility has come to light. A string of incidents in places like Wyoming and Pennsylvania in recent years has pointed to a possible link between hydraulic fracturing and pollution of groundwater supplies. In the worst case, such pollution could damage crucial supplies of water used for drinking and agriculture.

So far, the evidence of groundwater pollution is thin. Environmental groups contend that is

because governments have been slow to react to the drilling boom and are not looking hard for contamination. Gas companies acknowledge the validity of some concerns, but they claim that their technology is fundamentally safe.

The debate is becoming more urgent as gas companies move closer to more populated areas, especially in the Northeast, where millions of people are likely to find themselves living near drilling operations in coming years.

"To be able to scale up our drilling, clearly we have to be in sync with people's concerns about water," said Aubrey K. McClendon, chairman and chief executive of the Chesapeake Energy Corp., a leading gas company. "It's our biggest challenge."

Environmental activists say there is at least scattered evidence that fracturing operations can pose risks to groundwater sources, particularly when mistakes are made in drilling operations.

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