

# Anxiety on tap

By EVE BYRON, JOHN HARRINGTON and ALANA LISTOE Independent Record | Posted: Thursday, March 25, 2010 12:00 am

Boulder residents are being advised not to drink or even bathe in city water after a problem with one of the city's water storage tanks was discovered late Tuesday.

According to Jon Dilliard, public water supply bureau chief for the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, a hatch on one of the water storage tank had been pried open by someone.

"We assume someone went there and had to use some sort of tool," Dilliard said. "The FBI was contacted; I don't know what their response is going to be other than looking into this and checking it out. The criminal investigation division of the EPA also is involved, since accessing or tampering with a public water supply is a federal crime."

An official with the FBI couldn't be reached for comment. The EPA declined to comment on whether the federal agency had an ongoing investigation into the matter.

The situation was considered an immediate risk and the water supply shutdown will remain in effect until testing results indicate there is no risk to public health. Officials said they don't consider the water to be safe even if it's boiled.

DEQ is checking the water supply for bacteria, like animal feces or bodily fluids; volatile organic compounds (VOC), like paint thinner or gasoline; and organic materials like pesticides or herbicides.

Late Wednesday afternoon, the biological tests came back clean, Dilliard said. Test results for the VOCs are expected on Thursday, but the organic screen won't be completed until Friday.

Dilliard said it's still a possibility that the water supply system could be turned back on as early as Thursday.

"We're talking to the toxicologists to determine if we get the public system and home systems flushed out, whether we can get them to turn back on the water," he said, adding that the city of Boulder already was flushing its system.

In 2007, Boulder and DEQ settled a lawsuit over chemically treating the city's water for copper levels that exceeded federal standards. The treatment was controversial in the town, spurring a petition drive and rally.

Dilliard said he didn't think Wednesday's incident was related to the treatment issue.

At a public meeting Wednesday morning, Mayor Gary Craft said the compromise apparently happened sometime Tuesday afternoon. Public Works Director Dennis Wortman said there were no signs of tampering at 1 p.m. Tuesday, but at 4 p.m. a person who is familiar with the workings of the tanks noticed that the smaller tank had been tampered with. The older, smaller tank was shut off and isolated around 4:15 p.m. Tuesday.

About 1,360 people use the Boulder water supply system. The city has two tanks, an older, 75,000-gallon tank and a newer tank that holds 500,000 gallons. Craft said that regardless of what the tests show, the smaller tank will be drained and cleaned before being brought back online.

Officials contacted the media Tuesday night and went door-to-door Wednesday, telling citizens not to drink or bathe in the water.

Not all Boulder residents were happy with the way officials handled the water issue. Yvonne Lowe wondered why, if officials decided to shut down the tank and issue a water advisory late Tuesday, they waited until Wednesday morning to personally warn citizens.

"I'm concerned about the safety of our water, and the people who draw paychecks are not doing their jobs," she said.

Craft said officials weren't aware of anyone made ill by drinking the city's water.

Wortman said excess water is pumped uphill to the tanks only after passing through the city and being drawn into homes and businesses. The tanks provide extra capacity at times of high demand, typically in the summer, when the city's wells can't keep up with the needs.

Administrators at Jefferson High School said the school ran on a regular schedule Wednesday despite the closed drinking fountains and bathroom sinks.

Hand sanitizer bottles were placed in the restrooms and "closed" signs placed on all the drinking fountains in the building where around 220 students attend.

Sandwiches were served using disposable paper plates and plastic utensils since the water cannot be used to wash dishes, according to Superintendent Jim Whealon.

Laurie Vossler, owner of the L&P Grocery, said he opened his store a half-hour earlier than normal Wednesday, as a dozen people were waiting outside to buy bottled water.

Vossler said he made a trip to Helena Wednesday morning for two pallets of water, and felt confident that his grocery supplier would be able to meet the town's drinking water needs for the duration of the shut-down.

"For the most part, I think people understand the safety issue and are handling it pretty well," he said.

The city also brought in a water truck to City Hall at midday Wednesday and allowed citizens to fill containers.

"We do have potable water," Craft said Wednesday afternoon.

He added that anyone with questions can call 225-3381.

"Don't hesitate to call and get updates. But we'll be fielding a lot of calls and aren't sure if we can call everyone back," Craft said.

City officials note that inadequately treated water may contain disease-causing organisms that include bacteria, viruses and parasites. Those organisms can cause symptoms such as nausea, cramps, diarrhea and associated headaches. Anyone experiencing any of these symptoms should consult a physician.