

No money to pursue polluters: State environmental agency can't afford to investigate contaminated wells in Kalamazoo Township

by Alex Nixon | Kalamazoo Gazette



Scott Harmsen | Kalamazoo Gazette Residents of Orchard Avenue in Kalamazoo Township just west of Douglas must use bottled water because of contamination of their wells. The state will pay to connect them to the city of Kalamazoo's water system, but doesn't have the money to find the source of the ground water pollution.

KALAMAZOO TOWNSHIP -- The state's environmental agency is too broke to investigate who's responsible for contaminating 15 private wells in Kalamazoo Township.

So taxpayers will pay \$400,000 to connect the homes to municipal water, in addition to \$1.2 million they already spent to test water and provide some of the residents with bottled water for the past six to nine months.

But those residents are lucky. State officials say shrinking budgets and the depletion of funds from two voter-approved bonds may prevent them from paying for similar projects in the future.

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"Unless those funds are replaced in the near future, we may not be able to replace water supplies," said Bob McCann, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. "I don't know what I'd tell people. I don't know where that money would come from at this time."

Environmentalists say the budget problems have left the DEQ unable to chase down polluters and force them to clean up their messes. While money is available to provide water to the Kalamazoo Township homes, the pollution won't be cleaned up or prevented from spreading.

"That is par for the course these days," said Hugh McDiarmid Jr., a spokesman for the Lansing-based Michigan Environmental Council. "The DEQ's budget has been cut more than any other state department."

The core mission of the DEQ -- protecting the environment and public health -- is "becoming virtually nonexistent," McDiarmid said.

Industrial solvent discovered

Last summer, an Orchard Avenue resident called the Kalamazoo County Health Department to complain about a strange smell in the home's tap water, said Deb Cardiff, director of the county's environmental health bureau, which investigated the complaint.

The resident's water was tested, and a high level of trichloroethylene, or TCE, was discovered.

TCE is an industrial solvent generally used to clean grease from metal parts. It is not thought to occur naturally in the environment, and if ingested in large amounts, it can cause liver damage, coma and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It is also considered a probable carcinogen.

Officials have sampled all the wells within a one-mile radius of Orchard, a dead-end street that climbs east off Douglas Avenue. TCE, or related dangerous chemicals, were detected in all 15 wells within the one-mile radius, which included one well on Douglas, two on Woodward Avenue and one on North Westnedge Avenue.

Eight wells on Orchard and one on Douglas had levels of TCE above a safe level of 5 parts per billion, said Cora Rubitschun, a DEQ analyst.

Rubitschun said TCE concentrations ranged from trace amounts up to 80 parts per billion, which is 16 times the acceptable standard for drinking water.

Under state law, the DEQ steps in to pay for new water supplies when a responsible party can't be found, McCann said.

Some residents unfazed

While the DEQ has offered bottled water to all nine homes with unsafe well water, not all residents believe they shouldn't be drinking it.

Donald and Brenda Harrison have lived in their Orchard home for eight years and never noticed a problem with their water, they said. Even after receiving a letter from the DEQ warning them to not drink the tap water, and having bottled water delivered to their home, they continue to drink it.

"We just use it (the bottled water) to make tea," Brenda Harrison said.

But the Harrisons, like other homeowners on the street, will take the free hookup to municipal water, realizing that if they ever want to sell their house they'll need to be connected to municipal water.

The township, which received the \$400,000 contract to install the water line on Orchard, expects to begin work this spring. The project should be completed by September, Rubitschun said.

Source unknown

Mark DuCharme, a DEQ analyst who is overseeing the Orchard project, said officials tried to identify possible sources of the TCE pollution by looking at records of nearby businesses that may use the degreaser.

"There are no obvious indicators as to where it's probably coming from," he said.

To determine where the TCE is coming from, engineers would have to install groundwater-monitoring wells throughout the area, DuCharme said.

"In this case, we don't have the resources to complete that work," he said.

Nor will anything be done to prevent the pollution from continuing to spread, though DuCharme notes that most homes east of Orchard, in the likely path of spreading pollution from the site, are already hooked up to municipal water supplies.

Including the Orchard area, there are 35 known sites of TCE contamination in Kalamazoo County.

Budget cuts increase

Since 2002, state lawmakers have steadily reduced general-fund dollars to the DEQ -- by about 67 percent, to \$33 million for the proposed 2010 budget, McCann said.

The department's cleanup program receives none of that funding, he said. In the past several years, the department has increasingly relied on funding from two voter-approved bonds, which as of this year had been mostly appropriated to ongoing projects.

The result is little to no funding for dealing with new problems, McCann said.

The DEQ last May proposed asking voters to approve a new, \$1.3 billion environmental cleanup bond that would be used to deal with thousands of polluted sites. But the Legislature declined to put the measure before voters.

DEQ officials have said that since at least 2007, when the Kalamazoo Gazette detailed the agency's budget problems in a special report, funding cuts were reaching a crisis level. DEQ Director Steven Chester then told the Gazette that his organization was rapidly approaching the point where it would be unable to respond to new environmental problems.

"Whatever remediation systems we're paying for now, and whatever drinking-water supplies we're paying for now, the money won't be there. It will end," Chester said.

"The public won't be able to look to the DEQ for assistance. We won't be there. That's the bottom line."