

EPA's ever-tightening rules push small towns out of compliance

Rising expectations for water leave towns tapped out

TOM LUTEY Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Tuesday, March 9, 2010



JAMES WOODCOCK/Gazette Staff

Kurt Markegard, director of public works in Laurel, stands near the city's water intake pumps on the banks of the Yellowstone River. Laurel's taxpayers are facing increases from the cost of new regulations for the water plant.

Clean water goes down easy; it's the bill that's hard to swallow.

Few in Circle would have disputed that the town's water was bad. The salt content was so high it killed grass; the fluoride so concentrated it discolored teeth.

But when the Safe Drinking Water Act forced the community to do something about it, Circle's 365 bill-paying customers took a big gulp. The solution was a \$2.82 million reverse-osmosis treatment system to pull out the fluoride salt and other elements of concern.

"For us, that's a lot of money, we're a small community," said Carol Markuson, Circle town clerk.

The town applied for every state and federal program it could think of, but that still left more than \$800,000 to be repaid by ratepayers of Circle Water, now 13 years into a 40-year loan.

Rural communities say they're beginning to choke on the costs of complying with ever-tightening regulations on the water they drink and the sewage they discharge.

The Environmental Protection Agency consistently ratchets down on water quality requirements, said John Camden, of Montana Rural Water Systems. A requirement that a large city can meet quickly can be crippling in a small town. And recommended EPA alternatives, such as connecting to the nearest compliant water system, aren't possible for the state's few-and-far-between communities.

"When acceptable arsenic levels went from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts, it put 29 systems out of compliance," Camden said.

Last week the debate spilled into the chambers of the U.S. Senate, where Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., told EPA chief Lisa Jackson that his state's smaller communities wouldn't last without more help from the EPA.

"Quite honestly, they're getting to the point where they can't afford it, and they're not poverty-stricken areas, either," Tester said.

Jackson, speaking before a Senate appropriations subcommittee to which Tester belongs, assured the senators that the EPA would try harder.

"The Safe Drinking Water Act can offer loan forgiveness to help small communities who can't afford it, Jackson said.

Ultimately though, Jackson said the agency's ability to do more for rural water systems comes down to money.

Operators of rural water systems know there are no cheap fixes. In Laurel, the cost of water and sewer improvements over the past seven years is roughly \$9 million. The town has not only had to modify its handling of chlorine in its drinking water, but also its treatment of chlorine and other elements in its effluent, which is discharged into the Yellowstone River. Adding to the bill was the natural rechanneling of the Yellowstone River, which left the town's drinking water intake high and dry.

"I don't know if the citizens can afford those costs," said Kurt Markegard, Laurel Public Works director.

Base rates for Laurel water recently jumped more than \$60 a year. Sewer rates will soon follow suit as the community enters the next phase of its multimillion-dollar waste system upgrade. And available grants might not be helpful.

Markegard said the community recently turned down an offer for state assistance because matching money was required and the city didn't have it.

In Ekalaka, sewer bills for the community's 222 customers could increase \$45 a year as the town searches for ways to fund new testing requirements. New permit qualifications now require the town to test not only water leaving the sewer plant, as they always have, but now also the incoming sewage.

Public Works Director Elston Loken said the \$1,000 sewage testing budget could jump to \$10,000 a year.

"I don't know what we're going to do. We're working on it now. We'll borrow from another fund if that's needed," Loken said. "It's looking right now like we'll probably have a rate increase and we've got elderly residents with fixed incomes."

Few argue the benefits of cleaner water.

Circle water has been great since the improvements, Markuson said. The town's lawns and gardens have actually greened up. The old city water was so salty that watering grass more than infrequently could kill it. Now people water more.

The average monthly water bill is \$40.

"We were told that when you build a new plant, people cut back because it's more expensive," Markuson said. "We had an increase in water usage right away and it didn't go down."