

City of Socorro

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Arsenic in the Water is Nothing New

The notice in last month's utility bill alerted Socorroans to the City's violation of the drinking water standard for arsenic. This does not mean the amount of arsenic in the water has changed, it means the law has changed.

The History

In 1975, the Environmental Protection Agency, based on a Public Health Service standard established in 1942, set the allowable limit for arsenic at 50 **ppb (parts per billion)** of arsenic in the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974. In 2001, following a report from the National Academy of Sciences, the acceptable standard was changed to 10 ppb. This change affected water systems primarily in the West, where arsenic occurs naturally in volcanic rock deposits. Public water systems were given until July 2007 to comply with the new standard. After that time, a water sample was tested quarterly for a year, after which a water system was cited as being in violation of the standard. The samples collected in March, June, July and November of 2008 showed levels higher than 10 ppb (but all below the former standard of 50 ppb) for the 2 springs and 3 wells from which Socorro currently gets its water.

The Safe Drinking Water Act is a federal law enforced by the New Mexico Environmental Department. "We have to comply with their rules. They inspect and enforce," says City Utilities Director Jay Santillanes. "As long as we're moving forward with a solution to the

problem, we'll be issued notices but probably not be fined. If they fine us, they'd have to fine everybody," says Santillanes. "Their goal is to try to assist us to comply."

Taking Steps to Comply

Until the 1950s, Socorro's drinking water was supplied by Socorro and Sedillo springs. To keep up with a growing population, Socorro has added 5 wells, 3 of which are currently in service. Each of these water sources has a different average arsenic level. The springs average 41 ppb, the South Industrial Park Well is 20-25 ppb, Eagle Picher and Evergreen wells average 8 ppb. A consulting firm is working to determine options for dealing with the arsenic levels.

Based on experience in Bernalillo, a filtration facility will cost \$1 million to \$1.5 million to build and \$50,000 to \$100,000 annually to maintain. Options may include separate filtration facilities for the springs and the wells, or pipe and pump infrastructure to convey water to and from a single filtration facility across pressure zones. Another option might be blending water from low arsenic level sources with water from higher arsenic level sources. Report recommendations will include the projected cost of each option.

The next step will be finding the funding to cover the costs. The City began the process with the first water rate increase last year, to be followed by progressive increases over the next 3 years. This money will be used to pay the debt service on money the City borrows for the project. The City is also seeking grant and legislative funding.

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When will Socorro meet the standards?

The consultants' report is due in 2009. Santillanes projects it will take 18 months to design and build a facility. "So we're looking at 2 to 3 years down the line," he says.

Until that time, citizens of Socorro will be notified each quarter that the water is not in compliance with the law. "We don't want everyone to panic," says Production Superintendent Dixie Daniels. "It's the law that has changed, not the water."

To read the report on which the EPA based its decision, which includes details of the studies and effects of exposure to inorganic arsenic in drinking water, go to http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=6444&page=R1 or Google "National Academy of Sciences" arsenic 1999.

City Coffers Weather Weak Economy

While the State is facing a 450 million dollar budget shortfall, the City of Socorro is faring well. For the last 6 calendar months of 2008, the City's gross receipts showed a 3% increase over 2007, while lodgers tax was down 3% (though it was 13% higher than the same 6 months in 2006). Socorroans and visitors alike are shopping and spending money in Socorro and motel rooms are seeing use.

At the January 20 City Council meeting, a resolution was passed giving city employees a "short-term salary adjustment." This takes advantage of the city's current income, but does not encumber it long-term, should lodgers tax and gross receipts see a sudden decrease. Over each of the 5 pay periods following the passage of the resolution, employees' checks reflect their regular salaries plus an adjustment of \$62.50. Regular taxes and retirement are deducted from the adjustment, so totals vary from employee to employee depending on individual salary.

The state-mandated minimum wage went into effect January 1, raising the state minimum wage from \$6.55 to \$7.50 per hour. All city employees are paid above the state minimum wage, so there was no impact on the City's budget.

Trash Fashion Show Seeks Designers

Keep Socorro Beautiful is sponsoring a "Wearable Waste" fashion design contest to celebrate Earth Day on April 22. Designers will model garments (complete outfits suggested) constructed of materials that would otherwise be recycled or sent to the landfill. Judging will take place during the Trash Fashion Show on the plaza, with awards going to the top 3 entries in the children (11 and under), teen (12 to 19), and adult (20 and over) categories. Watch local papers for complete rules and application procedures.



Van Winkle Signs on as Police Chief

George Van Winkle was sworn in as Police Chief at the January 20 City Council meeting. He replaces retiring Chief Lawrence Romero.

Employee Anniversaries

Henry Jojola	15 years
Christopher Padilla	15 years
Angel Garcia	10 years
Warren Scates	10 years

City Council

Mary Ann Chavez-Lopez	Gordy Hicks
Toby Jaramillo	Donald Monette
Michael Olguin, Jr.	Ernest Pargas, Jr.
Peter D. Romero	Chuck Zimmerly
Ravi Bhasker, Mayor	
Pat Salome, City Clerk	