

Salt suspected in Southampton well contamination

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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SOUTHAMPTON – Some homes with wells on Route 10 have 14 times more salt, or 280 milligrams of salt per liter, in their drinking water than the 20 milligrams per liter recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency, according to town officials.

That is "a little off the chart," in the words of Mark Girard, chairman of the Planning Board and member of the Barnes Aquifer Protection Advisory Council, a collaboration that seeks to protect the Barnes Aquifer, which supplies water to Westfield, Holyoke, Easthampton and Southampton.

"There's a fair amount of sodium in some of these wells and people who have health concerns need to use bottled water or find another source of water," he noted.

Members of the Barnes Aquifer Protection Advisory Council, which is overseen by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and officials from Southampton and Westfield met with the state Highway Department Friday to discuss a study that says wells in Westfield and Southampton are contaminated by salt.

"The worst wells are on the Southampton side," Girard said.

Timothy and Linda Wing, both 62, of 407 College Highway, started drinking bottled water about a year ago, when a group from Smith College tested the water and advised them not to drink it.

"Once we've gone to bottled water and come back to this water it's terrible," said Timothy Wing. "You can really taste the difference. It's not safe to drink or cook with this water."

His wife's doctor advised her not to drink the water because she has high blood pressure, he added.

The affected homes are all located on Route 10, which is treated with road salt by the state Highway Department, Girard said. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Web site, salt is a cheap and effective solution to ice-covered roads that can be a problem for drinking water systems as runoff affects local soil quality, groundwater and surface water supplies.

Smith College geology professor Robert M. Newton made a presentation Friday to Massachusetts Highway Department representatives from the regional office in Northampton and the main office in Boston about his study that identified wells affected by salt over the last three years.

Girard said Southampton was included in the study after town officials noticed a trend in Westfield during the first year of the study. He noted that the council intends to expand the study to include more homes in Southampton as not everyone wanted to or could participate in the study before. At least six homes were found to have contaminated wells in Southampton and three were not, he said.

"We'll probably be doing up to 12 more in the next round of the study," Girard said.

This summer Girard knocked on doors to request people to file complaints or participate in the study. The Highway Department needs people to file complaints in order to move forward with fixing the problem, he said.

"That's a difficult process in itself for the people," Girard said. "People don't take time to do things and are fearful of government intervention. I'd say this is an educational process for both the residents and Mass Highway."

Three well-owners filed complaints since the start of January, and after the first month of testing they will receive bottled water or vouchers for bottled water from the state, Girard said. The Wings said they filed a complaint with the state's Highway Department two weeks ago and are expecting to hear back about receiving bottled water in about a week. Wing's daughter, Cherilynn Boden, of 415 College Highway, has two young children and spends about \$10 for 10 gallons of water a week for drinking and cooking.

"I hope something gets resolved about this," Wing said.

Wing said his well will be tested once a month for about 12 months.

"There's really nothing I can do about it; If road salt is the source it's going to happen forever," Wing said. "The only way I can see that it would ever be secured is to have town water put in. All the wells here are the same."

Girard said the study has been discussed in public meetings for a couple of years now, and he was surprised to hear it reported on the evening news Friday. "Publicity puts pressure where it needs to be," Girard said.

"Everything's moving in the right direction now; there's dialogue," he added. "If we can lower sodium over time this will all flush out and protect our water supply."

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.