



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **“County-wide Volunteer Private Well Testing Project Completed”**

The Howell County Health Department has recently completed its county-wide private well-water quality analysis project. According to health department administrator Chris Gilliam, “This type of extensive well-water testing is the first of its kind in the area. The quality of drinking water, for those in the county on private wells has been a concern of ours at the Howell County Health Department, practically since our inception. Thanks to voter approval of a mill-tax in 2003, as well as the progressive stance of the health department’s current board of directors on the issue of drinking water quality, we were able to assess the degree of public health threat drinking water poses to Howell County families. Few issues cut to the core of what we do in public health like that of working to assess and maintain water quality.”

The project was initiated in the Spring of 2005 with the sending out of “survey mailers” to individuals within the county that were not connected to either municipal or rural water districts. The mailers offered county residents a one-time opportunity to receive free testing of private wells, for those willing to participate in the project. “This effort provided us the means to collect baseline data on the county’s drinking water, and ascertain the existence and/or extent of our groundwater problems. The response to the survey was overwhelming, I would like to express my appreciation to all those in the county who participated, ensuring the project’s success,” Gilliam added.

Over the past 12 months Howell County Health Department collected nearly 1,000 well samples within the county. The results while not terribly surprising were rather sobering. Of the wells tested, 43.1% tested positive for *coliform bacteria* or *E coli*. One surprising result identified was the fact that overall, wells tested in the southern part of the county had considerably higher rates of failure than their neighbors to the north.

Presence of coliform bacteria indicates that the water is unsafe for drinking purposes. Water testing positive for E. coli indicates contamination of human and/or animal waste. Well water with E. coli present must not be used for drinking water or food preparation, and corrective action should be taken immediately.

It is recommended to have existing wells tested two to three times per year. The best time to sample your well water is when the probability of contamination is greatest. This is likely to be in early spring just after the thaw, after an extended dry spell, following heavy rains or after a lengthy period of non-use. It is also recommended to have testing done anytime well, pump or pipe work has been repaired or replaced, or if an observation of water having had a change in taste, color or odor.

Gilliam states, “Those who are interested in having their private well tested essentially have two options at this time. First, individuals have the option to draw their own water samples. To do so, simply come by the health department and pick-up a sample bottle and instructions. Collection containers other than those available through the health department will not be accepted by the State Lab. This method can be utilized at a cost of \$10 to the customer, to be paid to the State Lab. The second option is to request that an “official” sample be drawn by health department staff at a fee of \$20. This can be accomplished by calling or coming by the health department to schedule one of the agencies environmental staff to come to your home and draw the sample(s) for you.”

For individuals whose results come back “unsatisfactory for drinking” it is important that they discontinue use of their water supply for drinking and cooking purposes. Although unsatisfactory results do not conclusively confirm the presence of pathogenic organisms in the water, these results should alert one to such a possibility. Conduct emergency disinfection of all water used in drinking and cooking by boiling water vigorously for one full minute before use, or add two drops (double the amount for cloudy or colored water) of regular household chlorine bleach (5.25 percent chlorine) to each quart of water used. Mix thoroughly and allow to stand for 30 minutes before use.

A more long-term solution to address poor drinking water quality is the utilization of filtration. Filtration systems come in a number of different forms, including: activated carbon filtration, reverse osmosis, distillation, ozonation and ultraviolet light. Each of these requires installation of a water treatment system. Systems can vary widely in cost. For more specifics on the issue of treatment one can contact an area water systems retailer or the Howell County Health Department at 417/256-7078, and ask to speak to environmentalists Justin Frazier or Dawn Hicks. Another solution one should consider is to express interest in being connected to one of the existing rural water districts within the county. These districts continue to expand throughout the county, however they rely on individuals to express interest and make a commitment to connect to rural water before they can expand into any new designated areas.

According to Gilliam, “In addition to the individual efforts homeowners will be taking to address the problem, the Howell County Health Department is making the effort to

improve the situation as well. One of the findings revealed through the water analysis was that a number of the wells found to be contaminated were the result of the infiltration of human/animal fecal waste. This leads us to conclude that a significant portion of our groundwater problem is very likely result of malfunctioning septic systems. Howell County is currently in the process of adopting a local sewage ordinance as a means to address the problem. At present Howell County has no local sewage ordinance. As a result authoritative oversight of on-site septic issues is conducted by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. Unfortunately, DHSS currently has only one inspector for the county that conducts oversight of septic regulations. In addition, this inspector has a number of other counties he has oversight responsibilities for as well. With the implementation of a local sewage ordinance the health department would be positioned to be both more responsive to septic problems or issues, as well as more thorough in maintaining proper oversight. The ordinance will also allow individuals to work with local staff, as opposed to relying on the assistance of a DHSS staff out of the Springfield office, when confronted with on-site sewage system problems.”

Gilliam adds, “Until a better system of septic monitoring is adopted, the impact malfunctioning septic systems have on the quality of our drinking water will be an ongoing problem. Our karst topography makes us more susceptible than most to well contaminations resulting from malfunctioning septic systems. The time to address this issue is now.”

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