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News Release

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DRINKING WATER NOTICES NO REASON FOR CONSUMER CONCERN *They reflect careful government standards for water purity*

FRANKFORT, Ky. (May 9, 2005) – If you received a notice from your water company about “disinfectant byproducts” in your drinking water, you’re not alone. Thousands of Kentuckians are receiving the notices, which were required under standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Recently, many water systems in the state were required to notify customers that maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for certain disinfectant byproducts (DBPs) had been exceeded. The notices, intended as advisories, included language about potential health effects from consuming water with elevated levels of these substances.

The notifications used specific language and a format dictated by EPA, causing confusion among some consumers.

What it’s all about

To be made safe for drinking, water is disinfected during treatment. Without disinfection, bacteria, viruses and microbes would cause disease and possibly death. Dysentery, cholera and typhoid fever once were constant threats. Public health officials say chlorine treatment of drinking water is one of the most significant public health achievements of the past century.

However, disinfectants such as chlorine, chloramine, chlorine dioxide, ozone and bromine can react with substances that occur naturally in water at its source, such as decaying leaves or other organic matter. The reaction creates DBPs such as trihalomethanes (THMs) or haloacetic acids (HAAs). The EPA determined that long-term exposure to DBPs was potentially cancer-causing and thus set maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for water systems to meet. The standards were set cautiously and conservatively.

The MCL for THMs was set in 1970 and revised in 1998; the new rule also added monitoring for HAAs. The new rules became effective for all surface and groundwater systems on Jan. 1, 2004, regardless of population size. Water systems are required to monitor for THMs and HAAs every three months. At the end of 2004, quarterly monitoring was

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averaged and compared with the MCL. If the running annual average showed the level to be over that set by EPA, a water system was to examine its treatment techniques to get into compliance. It also was to notify the public of its monitoring results. Those averages and notifications became available in March.

Eight percent of large water systems – systems that served more than 10,000 people and treated surface water – were out of compliance in 2004, down from 37 percent in 2002. Most are taking further steps to control THM and HAA.

Smaller surface water systems and all groundwater systems began to comply with lower limits in 2004. As this was the first time that these smaller surface water systems monitored for THMs and HAAs, some had not changed their treatment processes enough to lower these levels and thus were out of compliance at the end of 2004. Of the approximately 208 groundwater systems and 103 small surface water systems, none of the groundwater systems exceeded the new MCL and 25 percent of the surface water systems did exceed them. That 25 percent was required to notify the public for the first time about this new monitoring. Those small surface water systems are now examining their treatment processes and preparing to make the changes necessary to return to compliance.

The health effects of DBPs are unclear. Some studies have shown no problems. Others have indicated a slightly higher incidence of bladder and colon cancer in areas where drinking water has been chlorinated. Though the science is uncertain, EPA has taken precautions by establishing MCLs. To experience health effects from water with elevated DBP levels, a person would have to drink two liters daily for 70 years of water containing elevated levels of these substances. Risks from not disinfecting are immediate, however.

For information about DBPs, contact the Drinking Water Hotline, 1-800-426-4791, or see these Web sites:

<http://www.epa.gov/safewater/hfacts.html>. Click on Disinfection Byproducts.

<http://www.epa.gov/safewater/mcl.html>. Scroll down to Disinfection Byproducts.

<http://www.epa.gov/safewater/pws/pn/handbook.pdf>. This site contains the handbook that tells how water systems are to notify their customers and exactly what language they must use.

Check out EPA's Safewater site, <http://www.epa.gov/safewater/>, for more information. Also see information on disinfection byproducts on the Kentucky Division of Water's Drinking Water Web site at

<http://www.water.ky.gov/dw/profi/tips/Disinfection+Byproducts.htm>.

What's being done and what consumers can do

Water systems, with assistance from DOW when needed, will be adjusting treatment processes. Customers of water systems that sent notices need not switch to bottled water. THMs dissipate readily from water. THMS and HAAs both are removed when water is heated, such as for making coffee or tea.

For cold drinking water, or in making beverages with cold water, allowing the water container to sit uncovered at room temperature for several hours before refrigeration will allow much of the THM concentration to dissipate.

People with special health needs or concerns should contact their physicians for additional precautions.