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Everyone deserves safe drinking water

Unlike public drinking-water systems, the private wells that 500,000 Massachusetts residents rely on are entirely unregulated. Legislation on Beacon Hill would change that.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated October 15, 2023, 4:00 a.m.



Westminster homeowner and her daughter walked in their backyard near their water well in 2022. The well water is contaminated with PFAS chemicals.

SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Mary Brolin lives in Boxborough where, like most homeowners, her drinking water comes from a private well. The well was tested when she bought the home 22 years ago and again when she had a pipe problem. When Brolin learned about a pilot testing program run by the state, she signed up and was dismayed to discover high levels of PFAS contamination. These are chemicals that have been linked to health problems, though Brolin said she is not aware of problems in her family.

Brolin, a scientist who works at Brandeis University, installed a system under her sink to filter her water. She wishes she had known to test earlier. “This was my first time on well water, when I bought my home,” Brolin said. “I didn’t know I should be testing it that frequently.”

In Massachusetts, anyone whose home is served by a public water source has the comfort of knowing their drinking water is regularly tested and treated. But for the approximately 500,000 Massachusetts residents who get their drinking water from private wells, most of whom live in rural communities, there are no statewide regulations. Private wells are governed by local boards of health under a patchwork of rules, if any.

There are no reliable data on how often individuals get sick from well water — based on anecdotal reports from testing companies and environmental advocates, it is infrequent but it happens. Creating a statewide testing standard, combined with homeowner education and money for those who need it, would better protect the health of the state’s rural residents.

To avoid burdening homeowners, well regulations could be modeled after existing regulations for private septic systems, which are often present in many of the same homes as private wells. [These rules](#) require that septic systems be inspected before a home is sold or when there is a significant change to a home. There is a public fund that offers low-interest loans to low-income homeowners with failed septic systems.

A [bill pending](#) in the state Legislature would give the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection authority to craft statewide regulations for private wells, while extending eligibility for the loans to homeowners who need well repairs.

The state agency would have to undergo a rulemaking process, consulting with experts and the public, to develop requirements. While some advocates may use that process to push for more stringent standards — like routine well testing for homeowners — a program that requires testing at the point of sale combined with education and resources would be a good compromise that protects public health while avoiding overregulation. The state agency should also consider imposing regular testing requirements for wells on properties used to generate rental income, so tenants and renters know their water is safe.

While there have been no widespread reports of illness from private wells, there are data suggesting that many private wells do not meet the standards that apply to public water sources. The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, which is pushing for state regulation of private wells, gave a grant to nonprofit RCAP Solutions to test 502 private wells. RCAP [reported](#) that approximately 32 percent had levels of contaminants exceeding state health standards for public water sources or suggesting potential health risks. Contaminants can be introduced from various sources: through a faulty well cap; from a nearby river, lake, or landfill; or from the ground.

“We know for a fact that private wells are contaminated, and people are drinking contaminated water unknowingly,” said Amie Shei, president and CEO of the Health Foundation.

Testing and remediating wells is not cheap, which is why any requirement should be paired with money for low-income homeowners. Dan Gaffney, who owns Bolton-based well testing company SafeWell Corp., said testing a well costs about \$250 and remediating contaminants can cost between \$1,000 and \$4,000.

But testing is important to protect the health of families living in rural parts of the state. Educating homeowners about the importance of testing, providing money for testing and remediation as needed, and ensuring that home buyers and renters know what they are getting into would help ensure all Massachusetts residents have equal access to safe drinking water.