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Some data in water report is off base

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A recent report that ranked Omaha's tap water among the worst in the nation was based partly on tests of water that never reached homes or businesses.

A widely known organization, the Environmental Working Group, is reviewing its report to correct errors, acknowledging to The World-Herald that some of its water-test data did not pertain to tap water.

The group, which gathered its data from government agencies, has heard complaints from utilities across the country, including the Metropolitan Utilities District in Omaha.

Some concerns center on the use of tests of water that had yet to be treated for use by people. In M.U.D.'s case, an official said, the utility's testing had determined that water was unusable, yet the results wound up in the environmental group's report.

Richard Wiles, senior vice president for policy and communications at the Washington, D.C.-based group, said high nitrate and nitrite readings for M.U.D. came from well water that was tested but never used in Omaha.

"They did point out several individual samples that were not tap water," said Wiles in an interview after M.U.D. officials raised questions about the report. "But it's a handful."

Could the corrections affect the environmental group's ranking of the quality of M.U.D.'s tap water as 94th out of 100 water utilities serving populations greater than 250,000?

"It's not fair to assume it will make it look better or worse," Wiles said. "The correction won't always make the utilities' water cleaner. It would just make (the data) more accurate."

Wiles said his group will work with any utility that has concerns with the study and rerun its analysis, including the rankings.

Wiles said the Environmental Working Group strove to use only tap water in its analysis. He

said the group had difficulty separating test results of raw water from tap water samples in California, but he was not aware of similar problems in other parts of the country.

M.U.D. is not the only utility crying foul.

“We’ve heard from some utilities that raw samples were picked up by the Environmental Working Group. It calls into question the accuracy of the report,” said Tom Curtis, deputy director of government affairs for the American Water Works Association, an education and advocacy group that includes about 4,700 utilities. “If the data is called into question, then the rankings are called into question as well.”

The Eastern Municipal Water District in Perris, Calif., east of Los Angeles, has asked the group to apologize and to remove all references to it from the report on the study. The district was ranked 97th for water quality out of the 100 water utilities. Gerald Shoaf, an attorney for the district, said untreated groundwater was included in the study.

“Your project may have been designed to impress by virtue of its sheer magnitude but, since the report exclusively concerns ‘tap water,’ it would have been appropriate to limit the scope of the study and analysis to enable verification,” Shoaf wrote in a letter to the Environmental Working Group.

Shoaf said the environmental group corrected some errors it had discovered about the California utility and changed its report to one alleged violation of drinking water standards instead of three. However, the district has not had any violations, Shoaf said. In addition, the utility’s ranking remained unchanged after the corrections.

Curtis’ organization has asked its members to provide details if they believe data were inaccurate or mischaracterized in the report. Curtis said a “fairly large number” had complained, but he did not know how many.

In the report, issued last month, the nonprofit environmental research group said it analyzed 20 million tap water quality tests performed by utilities between 2004 and 2009.

However, Joel Christensen, vice president of water operations at M.U.D., said some of M.U.D.'s tests were not done on tap water at all. Tests showing excessive levels of nitrates and nitrites were done on water from wells in Omaha that often are tested in the spring for possible use during peak periods, but those are not used if there are problems with the water, Christensen said.

“It was not run,” Christensen said of the wells. “We didn’t use it.”

M.U.D. officials explained the test results to state water officials, who regulate the utility along with the Environmental Protection Agency, Christensen said. But the Environmental Working Group apparently was not aware of those conversations.

Jack Daniel, head of the division that monitors drinking water for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, confirmed that M.U.D. did not use the wells.

“This water was never served to the people of Omaha,” Daniel said.

Christensen said he had received about half a dozen e-mails and letters from people concerned about the report.

“It sets it back some,” he said of M.U.D.’s efforts to assure people that their tap water is safe. “It hurts customer confidence needlessly.”

Christensen said he could understand the advocacy group’s error. M.U.D. does not treat water for nitrates and nitrites because the water it gets from the Platte and Missouri Rivers does not exceed the maximum 10 parts per million allowed by the EPA.

Water in wells in Omaha, which is tested each year, would flow untreated but within drinking water standards if it passed muster. Records obtained by the environmental group might have made it appear that water outside of those standards reached people’s faucets, Christensen said. But the fact remains that the water was not used.

“This is why you need to (verify the information),” he said.

The Environmental Working Group said it got results of tests conducted by Nebraska water utilities from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. It also worked through the AWWA and the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies to give utilities an opportunity to correct any errors before publishing the report.

Curtis at the AWWA said some utilities told his organization that they tried to correct some data in the report but later found that it had not been changed. Alan Roberson at the AWWA said some utilities had so many corrections they did not think it was worth trying to correct the report.

Christensen said M.U.D. reports its water quality information once a year to the public. It was aware that the group was conducting a study, Christensen said.

“There was an e-mail alert about a report coming out,” Christensen said. “I did not know what the report would say.”

Nebraska health officials said they gave the advocacy group 737,084 sample lab test results — 204,789 for 2003, 173,851 for 2006, 168,187 for 2007 and 190,257 for 2008. The tests were from all 1,300 water systems in Nebraska and were broken out by utility, state officials said, but only M.U.D. was ranked.

Tests for microbes, inorganic chemicals, lead, copper, disinfection byproducts and fluoride were included. Tests for the contaminants are done along the distribution system, and from wells, treatment plants and homes.

Christensen said he had other disputes with the report, including its reporting that M.U.D. had exceeded legal limits for manganese, trihalomethanes and atrazine, as well as nitrates and nitrites. None of those contentions were true, Christensen said.

The manganese tests were for water from wells along the Platte River that had not been treated, Christensen said. In addition, federal rules do not set a maximum contamination level for manganese. While too much manganese can stain faucets and other water fixtures and there are recommended levels, there are no required levels and health issues are not involved, he said.

Trihalomethanes, which are byproducts of water treatment used to control bacteria, registered at high levels during some times of the year, but the quarterly running average was below EPA requirements, Christensen said. Atrazine, a herbicide, also registered at high levels during some tests but did not exceed the average maximum level.

Wiles at the Environmental Working Group said his group chose the term “legal limit exceeded” to alert people that utilities can exceed health limits for contaminants for short periods of time and still comply with federal law.

Wiles compared high periods of contamination with the risk of speeding down a highway.

“You might average 60 mph in a car but go 90 mph part of the time and 30 mph the rest of the time,” Wiles said. “That doesn’t mean your 90 mph is necessarily safe.”

Christensen said the EPA had determined that trihalomethanes and atrazine present possible health problems if chronically excessive amounts are ingested, not if amounts occasionally are higher than recommended.

“It’s a chronic health effect, not an acute health effect,” he said.

Curtis at the AWWA said the Environmental Working Group was trying to set itself up as a

higher authority than the EPA.

“Everything is dangerous at some level,” Curtis said. “It’s all about the dose.”