



Update on Phases I and II: Addressing Nitrate in Southeast Minnesota

JANUARY-APRIL 2024 UPDATE

This document provides updates on Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) and Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) efforts to address nitrate in groundwater in southeast Minnesota from January through April 2024. The updates are categorized by how work is listed in the [Work Plan: Addressing Nitrate in Southeast Minnesota \(PDF\)](#).

Phase I Work

Education and outreach

Social media posts for Groundwater Awareness Week: MDH developed and shared posts about groundwater, private wells, and the importance of well testing for Groundwater Awareness Week. We shared the toolkit with partners and paid to promote some of the messages. Each of the two posts on Twitter had over 1,200 impressions. The Instagram posts reached over 1,200 people, and the Facebook post reached over 1,100 people. There were Instagram Story posts each day during the week with reach on average of 800 people.

Translating educational materials: Key documents, including our [Owner's Guide to Wells \(PDF\)](#) and [Well Water and Your Baby \(PDF\)](#) brochures, are currently with our translations team to be translated into Somali and Hmong. The brochures are already available in Spanish.

Minnesota Private Well Education and Steward Network: The University of Minnesota Water Resources Center is fleshing out the initial focus and approach for developing a network, starting in southeast Minnesota.

Provide online training for local government and natural resource professionals. Presented a training about private wells for 28 local soil and water conservation staff (3/28/2024). This included information on testing, health effects, and private well construction.

Provide necessary equipment, standard operating procedures, and support to local partners who can provide free water screening.

The MDA currently maintains 21 spectrophotometers statewide. Ten are located at MDA offices for analysis at research projects or to be available, if requested. Eleven are on loan to soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs); four of these machines are located in the southeast region. This includes a new partnership with the Wabasha SWCD, who requested a machine in February 2024.

Alternate water

Limited bottled water

The MDH was able to secure \$25K for some very limited bottled water for the most vulnerable private well households that have nitrate at/above 10 ppm and a pregnant person or baby under 1 year in the home. The MDH has set up a contract with a bottled water vendor and their corresponding distributor that covers southeast Minnesota. We are in the process of sending out postcards to households that have had an elevated nitrate result since 2019 to let them know they may be eligible for bottled water. We are also developing general outreach to private well households to let them know if they have a lab test result from an accredited laboratory since 2019 that shows they have elevated nitrate that they may be eligible for bottled water. The bottled water is a temporary option until a longer-term solution is available. ***This effort officially launched on May 10, 2024.***

This bottled water is running parallel to the MDA's efforts to provide reverse osmosis to eligible households. We are coordinating closely with each other and local partners on this effort.

We looked into many options to try to find alternate bottled water options with no additional funding available. An overview of the avenues that the MDH explored is below:

- Connected with the Minnesota Office of Homeland Security and Emergency management and Public Health Emergency Preparedness and response to see if there is any potential funding; they had none.
- Reached out to food banks and grocery stores about donations with no success.
- Researched potential donors, such as Coca-Cola, Culligan, and various foundations, but they all require the entity to be a 501c3 nonprofit.
- Connected with the MDH Legal team to assess if we could leverage some of the Clean Water Fund dollars that are designated for education and outreach to private wells for alternate water. That was considered unconstitutional.
- Discussed with nonprofits the possibility of providing water through existing water selling stations in local grocery stores. It is not clear how often these stations are tested or cleaned and people may struggle with the weight of the bottles and transporting them to and from their homes.
- Discussed with nonprofits having community (city) water systems open up a tap for people to come and fill water containers. The cleanliness of the containers would be questionable and the same challenges for lifting and transporting would hamper some from participation.

Initial mitigation effort

The MDA executed a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) that will provide limited funding for the implementation of a drinking water mitigation program in eight counties of southeastern Minnesota, including Dodge, Fillmore, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Wabasha, and

Winona. The JPA will be administered by the Olmsted SWCD and will be accomplished through a unique partnership between local SWCDs, County Water Resource Managers, and the MDA.

Specific objectives

- 1) Use existing water quality data to target past participants of MDA private well testing programs that had elevated nitrate-N concentrations (10 mg/L or above) and/or elevated pesticide concentrations and make them aware of this opportunity for reduced cost or free water treatment systems. ***This task has been completed and the well owners will be receiving program information by mail in May 2024.***
- 2) Develop a process to provide mitigation through professional installation of reverse osmosis treatment systems, adhering to the specifications established in this Scope of Work and including one year of system maintenance. ***This task is in progress.***

The SWCD will coordinate with local partners to distribute partial or full funding to participants for nitrate treatment and prioritize households with young children or pregnant women. The SWCD will use the TAP-IN pilot program as the model for the reimbursement strategy. The MDA will also provide mitigation for private wells that have tested over the drinking water standard for pesticides. Many of the wells with elevated pesticides also have elevated nitrate.

The following criteria have been established to guide cost share for the purchase and installation of point-of-use reverse osmosis water treatment systems.

- 1) 100% cost share for households with a private well that has drinking water at or above the nitrate health risk limit of 10 mg/L and have pregnant persons, or children under 1 year of age living in the household.
- 2) 100% cost share for households with a private well that is equal to or exceeded the cyanazine or other pesticide health risk limit.
- 3) 100% cost share for households with a private well that has drinking water at or above the nitrate health risk limit of 10 mg/L and have a demonstrated financial need.
- 4) 50% cost share for households with a private well that has drinking water over the nitrate health risk limit of 10 mg/L and do not meet the criteria above.

All efforts will be made by Olmsted SWCD to minimize costs for reverse osmosis system purchase, installation, and maintenance in order to provide as many systems as possible.

Limited well testing

The MDH secured \$25K for some very limited well test kits for private well households that have a pregnant person or baby under 1 year in the home and have not tested their private well for nitrate since 2019. The intent is to provide this free testing opportunity for all five MDH-recommended contaminants (nitrate, coliform bacteria, arsenic, manganese, and lead) so that no household is excluded from limited bottled water due to not having a well test result from 2019 or after. We are in the process of setting up a webpage, online request form, and providing partners with the link and talking points for outreach. ***This effort officially launched on May 10, 2024.***

Engage stakeholders and develop partnerships

Below is a list of meetings and communications we have had with partners and stakeholders.

- **TAP-IN:** the MDH meets with the TAP-IN leadership about every week and exchanges emails throughout the week. We meet with the larger group on an ad-hoc basis. The most recent meeting with larger group was on 4/22/2024.
- **Petitioners/NGOs:** the MDH regularly met with the Minnesota Well Owners Organization (lead petitioner for public health work) and the Minnesota Ground Water Association to discuss private wells, including efforts in southeast Minnesota. As there are new developments in the work plan or the legislature, the MDH has connected with Carly Griffith at Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, Michelle Stockness of Freshwater, and Steve Morse of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership to discuss the updates and legislative process.
- **Local government partners:** In December 2023, we had a series of meetings with the full TAP-IN group and any additional local government partners who wanted to join. Through those meetings we made it clear that the MDH is happy to participate in/present at any meetings they would like us at and that we are happy to provide any communications support they would find helpful.
- **Previous meetings and communications include:**
 - MDH: Delegated Well Programs (12/06/2024)
 - Provided a template slide deck for partners to use in discussing the issue and work plan with their leadership (12/12/2023)
 - State agencies (MDA, MPCA, MDH) meeting with SWCD managers in the 8 counties (1/19/2024)
 - MDH meeting with Southeast Public Health and Emergency Preparedness Coordinators (1/19/2024)
 - MDA: State agency and local SWCD partner meeting to discuss nitrate in groundwater and local staff capacity (1/19/2024)
 - MDH: Southeast Annual Groundwater Forum (2/21/2024)
 - MDA: Follow-up state agency and local SWCD partner meeting to identify largest capacity needs, how to address needs, and how to accelerate /enhance programs that are working. (3/11/2024)
 - MDH: Southeast water operators training (3/14/2024)
 - MDH: Southeast regional interagency groundwater workshop (3/14/2024)
 - MDH: Southeast Local Public Health Association meeting (3/22/2024)
 - MDA and MDH: Participated and presented at the 2024 Spring Farmer Meeting hosted by the Fillmore SWCD at the Fountain Community Center in Fountain, MN (3/26/2024). General talking points are on our webpage ([Response to EPA Nitrate Letter for Southeast Minnesota](#))

- Provided talking points about the status of supplemental funding proposals to cover the work so people could talk with their leadership and legislators (3/26/24).
- MDH: Southeast Minnesota Association of Conservation District Employees annual meeting (4/2/2024)
- MDH: Presentation and discussion with MN Corn Growers Association on the public health intervention (4/10/2024)
- MDH: Presentation on the SEMN Public Health Intervention as a lunch learn webinar for anyone that works for the State of Minnesota to join. 87 people attended. (4/10/2024)
- MDA/MDH/MPCA: Presentation and discussion with the Environmental Quality Board (EQB) on the state agency workplan and overlap with the State Water Plan. (4/17/2024)
- MDH: Slides and talking points to Winona County Water Planner for the County Board update that took place on 4/23/2024
- MDH: Participation in the Winona LaCrescent One Watershed One Plan Technical Advisory Group meeting to identify strategic alignments between their workplan and the agencies' response plan (5/1/ 2024).
- **Townhalls:** We are in the process of planning three townhall meetings in May and June. We gathered input local health departments and soil and water conservation districts on the timing, location, and topics for these meetings. They recommended meeting in May and June and that it may be better to wait until we know more about the funding situation for Phase II work.

Phase II Work

Phase II is set to start on July 1, 2024. That is the start of the new fiscal year. Phase II work is dependent on funding through the legislature. Below is an update on funding proposals and prep work related to providing public record of work.

Funding proposals

The MDH submitted a funding proposal through the Clean Water Council for supplemental Clean Water Fund dollars for \$6.8M. The proposal was developed in close collaboration with the TAP-IN collaborative for what would be needed to identify impacted residences, education and outreach, testing, and alternate water. Currently, the proposal has been split into funding from two separate sources in both the House and the Senate:

1. One part is to cover the well inventory, well testing, education and outreach, and local and state staff.
2. A second part is for mitigation.

The bills are moving through their respective bodies, and there are substantial differences between the House and Senate versions. We will know by May 20th what the final decision is.

Provide public record of work

The MDH has started working with the Environmental Public Health Tracking team to develop maps of nitrate in private wells for southeast Minnesota and a dashboard on the [MN Public Health Data Access Portal](#). This work is underway with hopes of having some initial maps and metrics posted this summer.

We will also update our webpage about response efforts ([Response to EPA Nitrate Letter for Southeast Minnesota](#)) by May 10 to include how households can see if they are eligible for bottled water or well test kits and request those resources.

Minnesota Department of Health
Water Policy Center
625 North Robert Street
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, Minnesota 55164-0975
651-201-4366
health.privatewells@state.mn.us
www.health.state.mn.us

5/14/2024

To obtain this information in a different format, call 651-201-4366.