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## Evaluation of Household Water Quality in Smyth County, Virginia FEBRUARY 2011 VIRGINIA HOUSEHOLD WATER QUALITY PROGRAM

### Background

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More than 1.7 million Virginia households use private water supplies such as wells, springs, and cisterns. The Virginia Household Water Quality Program (VAHWQP) began in 1989 with the purpose of improving the water quality of Virginians reliant on private water supplies. Since then drinking water clinics have been conducted in 86 counties across Virginia and samples analyzed from more than 14,500 households. In 2007, the Virginia Master Well Owner Network (VAMWON) was formed to support the VAHWQP. Virginia Cooperative Extension agents and volunteers participate in a 1 day VAMWON training workshop that covers private water system maintenance and protection, routine water testing, and water treatment basics. They are then able to educate others about their private water supplies. More information about these programs may be found at our website: [www.wellwater.bse.vt.edu](http://www.wellwater.bse.vt.edu).

Private water sources, such as wells and springs, are not regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Although private well construction regulations exist in Virginia, private water supply owners are responsible for maintaining their water systems, for monitoring water quality, and for taking appropriate steps to address problems should they arise. The EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards are good guidelines for assessing water quality. *Primary drinking water standards* apply to contaminants that can adversely affect health and are legally enforceable for public water systems. *Secondary drinking water standards* are non-regulatory guidelines for contaminants that may cause nuisance problems such as bad taste, foul odor, or staining. Testing water annually, and routinely inspecting and maintaining a water supply system will help keep water safe.

### Geology

The majority of Smyth County lies within the **Valley and Ridge** physiographic province of Virginia. The Valley and Ridge Province is located to the west of the Blue Ridge Province and is underlain by consolidated sedimentary rocks deposited by ancient seas. In the lowlands, such as the Shenandoah Valley, limestone and dolomite occur beneath the surface. These rock types have openings to yield water freely to wells and, therefore, form the most productive aquifers in Virginia's consolidated rock formations (i.e. west of the Coastal Plain Province). In contrast, the ridges and upland areas are often composed of sandstone and shale. These rocks lack the cracks and pores to transmit or store water. Therefore, in ridges and upland areas, there is often only enough water for rural and domestic water supplies.

The connection between groundwater and surface water plays a major role in groundwater recharge in the Valley and Ridge. Streams often cross fault zones leading to recharge of aquifers and wells in the fault zone area. Recharge also occurs through surface runoff travelling into limestone sinkholes, bypassing filtration through the soil. This can cause serious water quality problems since polluted surface water may be introduced directly into the groundwater system. In addition, calcium and magnesium from carbonate formations contribute to high mineral content and can cause hard water (GWPC, 2008).

The southern tip of Smyth County lies within the **Blue Ridge** physiographic province of Virginia. The Blue Ridge Province is a relatively narrow zone to the west of the Piedmont Province, with some of the highest elevations in the state. Beneath a thin layer of soil and weathered rock lies bedrock, a relatively impervious zone containing water primarily in joints, fractures, and faults. On the eastern flank

of the Blue Ridge, igneous and metamorphic rocks are most common. Sedimentary rocks are most common on the western flank. Steep terrain and a thin soil covering result in rapid surface runoff and low groundwater recharge.

There has been little residential or industrial development in the Blue Ridge itself, so groundwater use is mainly for domestic needs rather than for public wells. The lower slopes of the mountains are the most favorable areas for groundwater accumulation. Springs are common and are often used for private water supplies. Because the rocks in the Blue Ridge are relatively insoluble, the ground water is not severely mineralized, but iron content is high in some locations (GWPC, 2008).

### Overview

In February 2011, 22 residents from Smyth County participated in a drinking water clinic sponsored by the local Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) office and the Virginia Household Water Quality Program. Clinic participants received a confidential water sample analysis and attended educational meetings where they learned how to interpret their water test results and address potential issues. The most common household water quality issues identified as a result of the analyses for the participants were high levels of iron, total dissolved solids, hardness, and sodium, and the presence of total coliform bacteria. *Figure 1*, found at the end of this report, shows these common water quality issues along with basic information on standards, causes, and treatment options.

### Drinking Water Clinic Process

Any Smyth County resident relying on a well, spring, or cistern was welcome to participate in the clinic. Advertising began 8 weeks prior to the first meeting and utilized local media outlets, announcements at other VCE meetings, and word of mouth. Pre-registration was encouraged.

**Kickoff meeting:** Participants were given a brief presentation that addressed common water quality issues in the area, an introduction to parameters included in the analysis, and instructions for collecting their sample. Sample kits with sampling instructions and a short questionnaire were distributed. The questionnaire was designed to collect information about characteristics of the water supply (e.g. age, depth, and location), the home (e.g. age, plumbing materials, existing water treatment), and any existing perceived water

quality issues. The purpose of the clinic was to build awareness among private water supply users about protection, maintenance, and routine testing of their water supply.

Participants were instructed to drop off their samples and completed questionnaires at a predetermined location on a specific date and time.

**Sample collection:** Following collection at a central location, all samples were iced in coolers and promptly transported to Virginia Tech for analysis.

**Analysis:** Samples were analyzed for the following water quality parameters: iron, manganese, nitrate, chloride, fluoride, sulfate, pH, total dissolved solids (TDS), hardness, sodium, copper, total coliform bacteria, and *E. coli*. General water chemistry and bacteriological analyses were performed by the Department of Biological Systems Engineering Water Quality Laboratory at Virginia Tech. The Virginia Tech Soils Testing Laboratory performed the elemental constituent analyses. All water quality analyses were performed using standard analytical procedures.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Safe Drinking Water Standards, which are enforced for public water systems in the U.S., were used as guidelines for this program. Water quality parameters not within range of these guidelines were identified on each test report. Test reports were prepared and sealed in envelopes for confidential distribution to clinic participants.

**Interpretation meeting:** At the interpretation meeting, participants received their confidential water test reports, and VCE personnel made a presentation providing a general explanation of what the numbers on the reports indicated. In addition, general tips for maintenance and care of private water supply systems, routine water quality testing recommendations, and possible options for correcting water problems were discussed. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and discuss findings either with the rest of the group or one-on-one with VCE personnel after the meeting.

## Findings and Results

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### Profile of Household Water Supplies

The questionnaire responses, provided by all 22 participants at the clinic, helped to characterize the tested water supplies. Sixty-four percent of participants in the clinic indicated their water supply was a well, while 32% indicated

having a spring and 5% specified having a cistern.

Participants were asked to classify their housing location as one of four categories. The choices, ranging from low to high population density, are: (1) on a farm, (2) on a remote, rural lot, (3) in a rural community, and (4) in a housing subdivision.

For the Smyth clinic, a farm was the most common household setting (59%), followed by a rural lot (27%).

Major sources of potential contamination near the home (within 100 feet of the well) were identified as stream (32%), septic system (9%), and an oil tank (9%). According to participants, larger, more significant potential pollutant sources were also proximate (within one-half mile) to water supplies. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that their water supply was located within one-half mile of a major farm animal operation while 41% indicated that their water supply was within one half-mile of a field crop operation.

On the questionnaire, participants also described the type of material used for water distribution in each home. The two most common pipe materials were plastic (50%), copper (46%), and galvanized steel (18%).

To properly evaluate the quality of water supplies in relation to the sampling point, participants were asked if their water systems had water treatment devices currently installed, and if so, the type of device. Forty-one percent of participants reported at least one treatment device installed.

### **Participants' Perceptions of Household Water Quality**

Participants were asked whether they perceived their water supply to have any of the following characteristics: (1) corrosive to pipes or plumbing fixtures; (2) unpleasant taste; (3) objectionable odor; (4) unnatural color or appearance; (5) floating, suspended, or settled particles in the water; and (6) staining of plumbing fixtures, cooking appliances/utensils, or laundry.

Staining problems were reported by 36% of clinic participants. White/chalky (32%) and rusty (5%) were the reported stains. An objectionable odor was indicated by 9% of clinic participants, citing a rotten egg smell in their water (9%). Nine percent reported unpleasant tastes, indicating sulfur as the most common (9%) followed by bitter taste (5%). Five percent cited having particles in their water described as brown sediment (5%). Finally, 5% reported an

unnatural appearance in their water, observed as muddy.

### **Bacteriological Analysis**

Private water supply systems can become contaminated with potentially harmful bacteria and other microorganisms. Microbiological contamination of drinking water can cause short-term gastrointestinal disorders, such as cramps and diarrhea that may be mild to very severe. Other diseases that may be contracted from drinking contaminated water include viral hepatitis A, salmonella infections, dysentery, typhoid fever, and cholera.

Microbiological contamination of a water supply is typically detected with a test for total coliform bacteria. Coliform bacteria are present in the digestive systems of humans and animals and can be found in the soil and in decaying vegetation. While coliform bacteria do not cause disease, they are indicators of the possible presence of disease causing bacteria, so their presence in drinking water warrants additional testing.

Positive total coliform bacteria tests are often confirmed with a re-test. If coliform bacteria are present in a water supply, possible pathways or sources include: (1) improper well location or inadequate construction or maintenance (e.g. well too close to septic, well not fitted with sanitary cap); (2) contamination of the household plumbing system (e.g. contaminated faucet, water heater); and (3) contamination of the groundwater itself (perhaps due to surface water/groundwater interaction).

The presence of total coliform bacteria in a water sample triggers testing for the presence of *E. coli* bacteria. If *E. coli* are present, it indicates that human or animal waste is entering the water supply.

Of the 22 samples collected, 55% tested positive (present) for total coliform bacteria. Subsequent *E. coli* analyses for all of these samples showed that 41% of the samples tested positive for *E. coli* bacteria.

Program participants whose water tested positive (present) for total coliform bacteria were encouraged to retest their water to rule out possible cross contamination, and were given information regarding emergency disinfection, well improvements, and septic system maintenance. Any participant with a sample that tested positive for *E. coli*, was encouraged to take more immediate action, such as boiling water or using another source of water known to be safe until the source of contamination could be addressed and the water supply system

disinfected. After taking initial corrective measures, participants were advised to have their water retested for total coliform, followed by testing for *E. coli*, if warranted. In addition, participants were provided with resources that discussed continuous disinfection treatment options.

*Table 1*, found at the end of this report, shows the general water chemistry and bacteriological analysis contaminant levels for the Smyth drinking water clinic participants.

### **Chemical Analysis**

As mentioned previously, all samples were tested for the following parameters: iron, manganese, nitrate, chloride, fluoride, sulfate, pH, total dissolved solids (TDS), hardness, sodium, and copper. Selected parameters of particular interest for the Smyth drinking water clinic samples are discussed below.

### **Hardness**

Hard water contains high levels of calcium and magnesium ions that dissolve into groundwater while the water is in contact with limestone and other minerals. Hard water is a nuisance and not a health risk.

Seventy-seven percent of the clinic samples were considered “very hard” (exceeding 180mg/L of hardness). Hard water is indicated by scale build-up in pipes and on appliances, decreased cleaning action of soaps and detergents, and reduced efficiency and lifespan of water heaters. Ion exchange water softeners are typically used to remove water hardness.

### **Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)**

As water moves underground or over land it dissolves a variety of compounds including minerals, salts, and organic compounds. The concentration of TDS in a water sample is a measure of all dissolved impurities, but does not identify individual compounds or their sources. High concentrations of dissolved solids may cause adverse taste effects and may lead to increased deterioration of household plumbing and appliances. The EPA secondary maximum contaminant level (SMCL) is 500 mg/L for TDS. Fourteen percent of Smyth participants exceeded this level.

### **Conclusions**

Participants were asked to complete a program evaluation survey following the interpretation meeting. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said they plan to seek additional testing, 38% said they would work to determine

the source of pollution, and 75% plan to discuss what they learned with others.

### **References**

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Accessed online 11/2011.

### **Additional Resources**

For more information about the water quality problems described in this document, please refer to our website. Here you will find resources for household water testing and interpretation, water quality problems, and solutions:

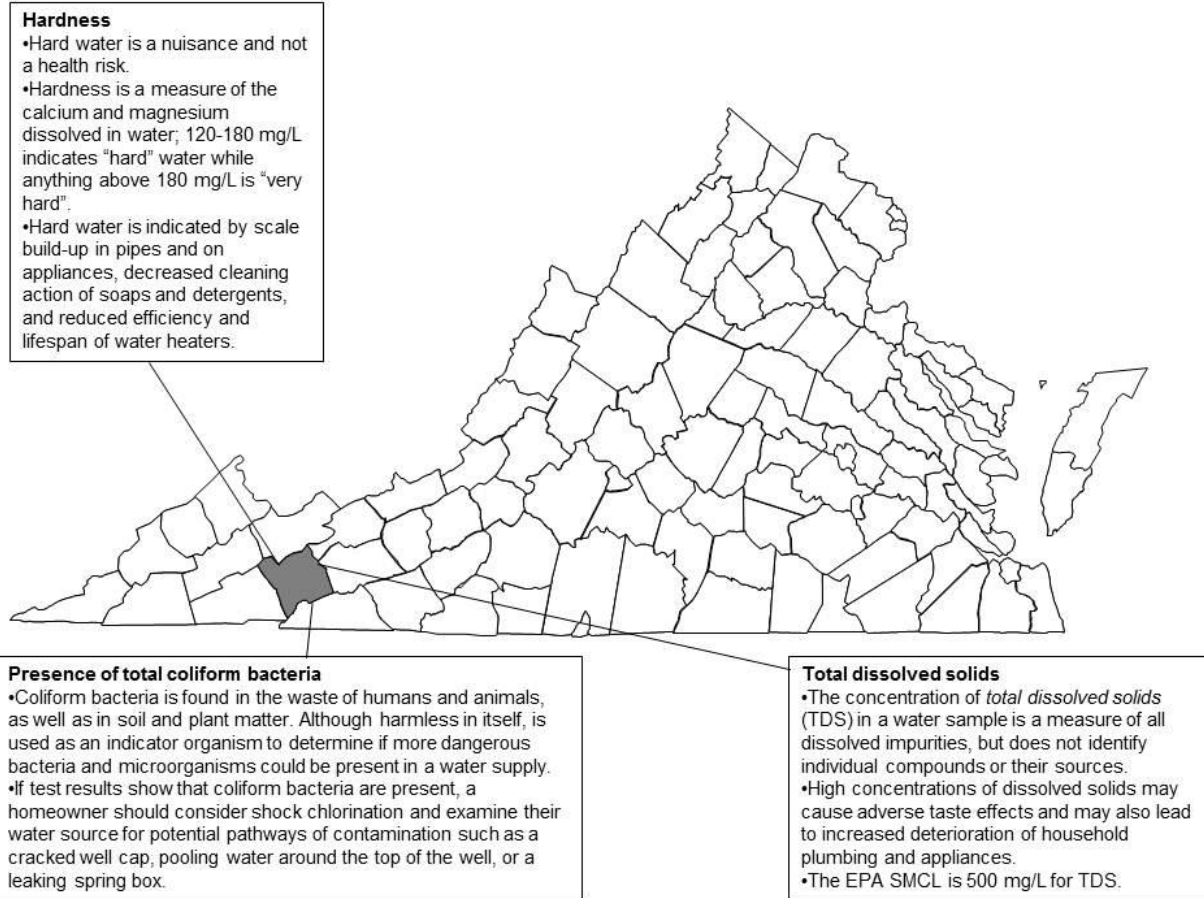
[www.wellwater.bse.vt.edu/resources.php](http://www.wellwater.bse.vt.edu/resources.php)

### **Acknowledgements**

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**Figure 1.** The most common household water quality issues found in the 22 Smyth clinic participant samples were high levels of hardness, total dissolved solids, and the presence of total coliform bacteria.

**2011 Smyth County  
VAHWQP Drinking Water Clinic Results  
N = 22 samples**

<b>Test</b>	<b>EPA Standard</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Maximum Value</b>	<b>% Exceeding Standard</b>
<b>Iron (mg/L)</b>	0.3	0.118	0.817	9.1
<b>Manganese (mg/L)</b>	0.05	0.014	0.076	4.5
<b>Hardness (mg/L)</b>	180	262.5	467.6	77.3
<b>Sulfate (mg/L)</b>	250	10.8	40.2	0
<b>Chloride (mg/L)</b>	250	21	223	0
<b>Fluoride (mg/L)</b>	2.0/4.0	0.19	0.39	0
<b>Total Dissolved Solids</b>	500	302	1012	13.6
<b>pH</b>	6.5 to 8.5	7.09	4.07 (min) 8.10 (max)	4.5 (<6.5) 0 (>8.5)
<b>Copper (mg/L)</b>	1.0/1.3	0.027	0.381	0
<b>Sodium (mg/L)</b>	20	20.19	240.60	9.1
<b>Nitrate - N (mg/L)</b>	10	0.472	2.070	0
<b>Total Coliform Bacteria</b>	ABSENT	--	--	54.5
<b>E. coli Bacteria</b>	ABSENT	--	--	40.9

**Table 1.** General water chemistry and bacteriological analysis contaminant levels for Smyth drinking water clinic participants (N=22). This program uses the EPA primary and secondary standards of the Safe Drinking Water Act, which are enforced for public systems, as guidelines for private water supplies.