

## Uranium found seeping into wells

*Clinic to test water samples for naturally occurring element*

Staci Matlock | The New Mexican  
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Nature, not Los Alamos National Laboratory, is currently the biggest source of uranium contamination in water around Española, Pojoaque, Nambé and Santa Fe.

Several private water wells around Pojoaque and Nambé have twice tested with uranium levels three to six times higher than the federal recommended levels for safe drinking water.

Meanwhile, Española shut down two wells this week after the state Environment Department found elevated levels of uranium in the water supply. Española City Manager James Luján said the wells will not be a problem in the future.

"We plan to shut them off completely and plan to blend other wells that we do have in this area," said Luján in a statement.

Around Santa Fe, a test of 475 wells last year found several with elevated uranium, but nothing compared to wells tested subsequently in Nambé and Pojoaque. The testing and analysis were part of New Mexico Small Business Assistance project between LANL and the Good Water Company of Santa Fe, which designs, installs and services water-purification systems.

High uranium levels found in a half-dozen wells around the Nambé and Pojoaque corridor, between the Rio Grande and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, mirrored the results of a larger study conducted in 2005 by Santa Fe County and LANL.

"One well in the corridor tested with 60 times the EPA maximum contamination level for uranium," said Stephen Wiman, owner of Good Water Company.

Uranium is a radioactive heavy metal that occurs naturally in some granites, ore bodies and sandstones found in the Southwest. It erodes and decays naturally into groundwater or as the result of uranium-mining operations. It also is used as a part of nuclear research.

People can be exposed to uranium through air, water and food.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency set 30 micrograms per liter as the safe drinking-water standard. Wells in the Pojoaque and Nambé corridor measured with uranium levels from less than 30 to 1,800 micrograms per liter, according to Pat Longmire, a LANL groundwater chemist who helped analyze the samples.

Longmire said over thousands of years, the naturally occurring uranium near the Sangre de Cristo Mountains dissolved slowly into groundwater. Geologists are able to determine the source and movement of the uranium by studying its different forms, called isotopes. "The movement of the uranium was from east to west," Longmire said.

Studies are mixed about the health effects of exposure to uranium. The heavy metal accumulates in the bones and kidneys, but the effects are still debated by health researchers.

Heidi Krapfl, chief of the New Mexico Environmental Health Epidemiology Bureau, said the one known effect is changes in the way the kidney operates. She said once a person is no longer exposed to high uranium levels, kidney functions return to normal. She said there is no definitive link between uranium exposure and cancer or other illnesses.

But the EPA drinking-water standard is meant to protect people from even unknown health effects. "Our emphasis is on reducing the exposure of people to uranium," she said.

A certified reverse osmosis system is the best way to reduce uranium levels in drinking water.

The Good Water Company is conducting a free water clinic from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the Pojoaque Wellness Center.

Private well owners in Pojoaque, the Pueblo of Pojoaque, Nambé, the Pueblo of Nambé, Tesuque, the Pueblo of Tesuque, the Pueblo of San Ildefonso, and surrounding areas can bring in water samples for testing.

The Good Water Company will do free tests for hardness, pH, total dissolved solids, total iron, arsenic, fluoride and nitrates.

Well owners also can pay \$20, the company's cost, to send samples for uranium testing at the Scientific Laboratory Division of the New Mexico Department of Health. The Indian Health Service will pay the fee for qualified Native Americans.

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## **IF YOU GO**

**What:** Free and reduced-cost well water testing for uranium and other contaminants

**When:** 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** The Pojoaque Wellness Center