

Our occasional co-existence with uranium

The New Mexican

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Water and the American West have always been at odds with each other — mainly because there's so much of the latter and so little of the former. Yet as many a Western novel or movie have made clear, there's more than quantity at issue: For dramatic effect, you'd tend to read about or see alkali-poisoned water holes — and devastated pioneers, miners or Cavalry troops. But water contamination can take many forms, and among the hazards long faced by Northern New Mexicans is uranium.

And not just the stuff brought to, and scattered around, Los Alamos National Laboratory in the course of building nuclear weapons: As The New Mexican's Staci Matlock has made clear in many reports, the latest yesterday morning, there's plenty of naturally occurring uranium in them thar hills and valleys — seeping into at least a few of our region's wells.

Out in the Pojoaque Valley north of Santa Fe, several private wells show uranium amounts three to six times higher than the recommended federal levels for what's safe. And in Española, a few miles farther down the road, the town shut down two wells in recent days; the state Environment Department found elevated levels in its water supply.

Here in Santa Fe, several wells have shown elevated levels — but nowhere near as high as the northern end of the county.

The test results come as no surprise to longtime residents of the region; five years ago, tests conducted by the county and the Los Alamos lab showed similar results.

Nor is there any cause for alarm; caution, yes; panic no.

Health researchers recognize that tiny amounts of the radioactive stuff can build up in bones, and can get caught in kidneys doing their job. There can be changes in the way the kidneys function — which return to normal once their owners aren't exposed to high uranium levels. And Heidi Frapfl, head of the state's Environmental Health Epidemiology Bureau, told The New Mexican's Matlock that there's no definitive link between that exposure and cancer or other illnesses. Other experts, however, may disagree.

At any rate, the state wants to head off unknown effects — by reducing exposure. It recommends reverse-osmosis filtration of drinking water where uranium levels are high.

Santa Fe isn't one of those places; in fact, Environment Department officials have noted that our community has some of the best water in the country. That's saying a lot, considering how little we have — but where water is plentiful, people are, too; so between our relatively sparse population and the municipal water-treatment system, there's little to lose sleep over on that account.

The same might apply in the northern parts of the county — but to be on the safe side, Pojoaque Pueblo and the Good Water Company, a local water-purification outfit run by scientist Stephen Wiman, is putting on a free clinic Saturday at the pueblo's wellness center on the back road behind the Cities of Gold casino. It'll take place from 10 to 2.

It's a good chance to bring in samples for testing — and you can learn a lot about what's in your water in terms of hardness, pH, dissolved solids, iron, arsenic, fluoride and nitrates. For uranium, well owners can get their supplies tested for a \$20 processing fee; the company sends samples on to the state Health Department.

It's a good place for the clinic, too, given the higher radiation levels found in some places out there.

Whether you're concerned about your water, or merely curious about the many regional phenomena affecting it, this could be a midday well spent.