

Long-term bad water from prison water plant in Bledsoe County eyed for improvement

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PIKEVILLE, Tenn. - If you want reliably good, clean water to drink in northwest Bledsoe County, you have to go to prison.

County resident Charles Wagner eyes the edges of state Highway 101, the route to the Bledsoe County Correctional Complex, with frustration and suspicion.

That's where two water lines lie, one on each side of the road.

One flows toward the prison with almost crystal-clear water from a renovated water treatment plant in Pikeville, Tenn., and the other is an aging line coming from the prison property that distributes water from the treatment plant at the now-closed Taft Youth Development Center, owned by the Tennessee Department of Correction.

County residents can't tap the directly linked line filled with clean water headed to inmates because its capacity is matched closely to demand at the state prison.

The residents can get only the prison plant's water that has drawn dozens of violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation since 2005.

All or most of the violations are for trihalomethanes and haloacetic acids, two byproducts of drinking water disinfection.

"Each one of these is a cancer-causing agent and causes liver and central nervous system issues," Wagner said.

Wagner is irked that Fall Creek Falls Utility District -- the distributor of the state-treated water to about 1,650 customers including Fall Creek Falls State Park -- gets cited for water quality violations over which it has no control, and he says the state ignores what he considers "a public health issue."

A retired mechanical engineer, Wagner has collected a decade's worth of TDEC test results on the water coming from his tap. He said the state shouldn't be in charge of regulating itself.

"It's the state versus the state," he said. "They all work for the state and they don't want to step on each other's toes, so they just let it go."

TDEC and prison system officials say recent work on the plant raised water quality to acceptable standards, but Wagner and officials with the Tennessee Clean Water Network are worried the steps are not long-term fixes.

"People drinking water from Taft and the Fall Creek Falls Utility District have a right to be upset," Tennessee Clean Water Network attorney Stephanie Matheny said.

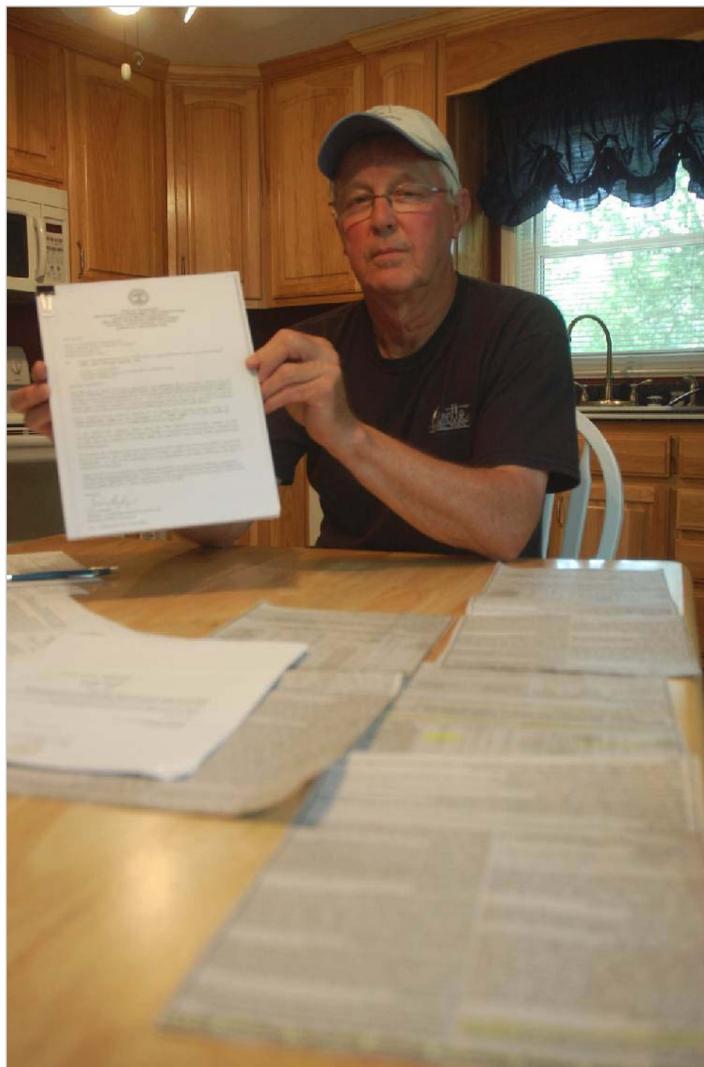
"Residents have been receiving notices of exceedances for many years," Matheny said. "It's well past time for a permanent fix -- not just interim measures -- to this serious public health problem."

There were talks more than a year ago about transferring ownership of the prison's plant to Pikeville.

A timeline for assessment, updates and an early 2015 transfer of the plant to the city was issued by TDOC in May, but local officials say there has been no work done toward the transition until very recently.

Early engineering estimates predict renovations would cost \$3 million and take up to 18 months to complete, according to Pikeville Mayor Phil Cagle. The city and its water customers can't afford that, he said.

Cagle said city officials will meet with TDOC officials this month to discuss the plant, but he's not ready for the city to take on somebody else's problems.



Bledsoe County resident Charles Wagner wants the water...
Photo by Ben Benton /Times Free Press.

FROM WHENCE IT COMES

The water treatment plant at Taft Youth Development Center in Northwest Bledsoe County draws its water from a dammed portion of Bee Creek on the Bledsoe-Cumberland county line.

The water piped from Pikeville, Tenn.'s water treatment plant to the Bledsoe County Correctional Complex and Southeastern Tennessee State Regional Correctional Facility comes from wells in the Sequatchie Valley and is treated at the city's renovated water plant.

Source: Fall Creek Falls Utility District, city of Pikeville

DISINFECTANT BYPRODUCTS

Trihalomethanes and haloacetic acids are chemicals that are formed along with other disinfection byproducts when chlorine or other disinfectants used to control microbial contaminants in drinking water react with naturally occurring organic and inorganic matter in water.

* **Trihalomethanes:** The chemicals are chloroform, bromodichloromethane, dibromochloromethane and bromoform. Maximum allowable level is 80 parts per billion.

When the idea was first discussed with TDOC more than a year ago, Cagle and city officials could see the Taft plant as a backup for the city system. But that was when officials thought Pikeville would inherit an updated facility.

Cagle said the city was about \$1.2 million under budget on construction of the new prison water line, an amount he suggested be put toward renovation of the prison's water treatment plant.

After that first meeting, however, the conversation with prison officials "went cold," Cagle said. "I couldn't even get a return phone call."

Cagle worried that if the city took the plant as it stands now, TDEC "would shut us down."

But TDEC spokeswoman Kelly Brockman said prison-sourced water shows improvement after an April 30 sanitary survey at the new prison and a May 6 plant inspection.

"Based on this most recent survey, the division did not see anything to indicate the water was not safe for human consumption," Brockman said in an email. She said other improvements, like safety equipment related to the chlorine used to disinfect the water, still should be made.

State officials have asked for a connection between the prison plant and the utility's distribution network to act as backup in case water quality problems arise again at the plant, she said.

While changes and upgrades have been "slow and incomplete," water quality is beginning to improve, she said.

"According to TDEC, the system is meeting water quality standards," TDOC spokeswoman Neysa Taylor said in an email last week.

That's good news compared to a 2013 report published in the Bledsonian Banner on the utility district's water quality. Then, tests showed the average level of trihalomethanes at 101.1 parts per billion, and for haloacetic acids at 94.6 ppb, utility district records show. The maximum contaminant level for trihalomethanes is 80 parts per billion and for haloacetic acids it's 60 ppb.

Taylor said improvements at the prison's plant so far include "cleanup of the existing operations and physical plant, changes in staffing at the plant, the addition of on-site 'immediate' testing equipment to respond in a timely manner to issues as they develop, providing free flush water -- 400,000 gallons - - to Fall Creek Falls Utility District to allow them to better flush their system, and a host of other work by consultants and staff."

Bledsoe County Mayor Bobby Collier, also a Fall Creek Falls Utility District water customer, said he hopes the recent improvements translate into better, long-lasting water quality.

But he's hedging his bets.

"When my granddaughter is here with me, she drinks bottled water," Collier said. "Most people up here are refiltering their water. I think the community deserves quality water. They've been patient and kind and understanding for a long, long time."

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*** Haloacetic acids:** The acids are monochloroacetic acid, dichloroacetic acid, trichloroacetic acid, monobromoacetic acid and dibromoacetic acid. Maximum allowable level is 60 part per billion.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency