KCBD INVESTIGATES: Are new water regulations worth the cost?

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SEAGRAVES, TX (KCBD) -

Residents on the South Plains are watching their water rates skyrocket as municipalities work to become compliant with stricter water regulations.

Back in 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency lowered the amount of arsenic allowed in drinking water. We have learned this new standard has affected at least three cities on the South Plains: Denver City, Seagraves and Wolfforth.

The Environmental Protection Agency reports that long-term exposure to arsenic in drinking water has been linked to several different types of cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Ideally, the EPA wants to eliminate arsenic in drinking water altogether, but realizes this creates a financial burden for community water systems.

The EPA changed the amount of arsenic allowed in drinking water from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion, stating in their ruling that the cost is justified by the benefits.

We spoke to different cities right here on the South Plains to see just how much that change is costing them.

State Senator Charles Perry said the Environmental Protection Agency's standards are politically motivated.

"They want to see Texas suffer in spending money," Perry said.

"If the water was healthy for you to drink prior to the standard that's been in effect for 30 years, it's probably not unsafe tomorrow because the EPA arbitrarily lowered the standards because the technology allowed them to do it," Perry said.

Doctor Kamelshwar Singh has a background in environmental toxicology and has published his research on the adverse effects of chronic exposure to arsenic.

He said that like the EPA stated in their ruling, consuming arsenic in drinking water, even at low levels, can be dangerous.

"Based on my study and what we are seeing in literature now, certain arsenic even lower than 10 parts per billion have adverse health effects including cancer, obesity, diabetes, immune response, cardiovascular diseases," Dr. Singh said.

According to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's records, Denver City has had historical arsenic violations and was referred to EPA enforcement in February of 2013.

The city manager tells us they drilled eight new wells, projects costing roughly $3 million in order to become compliant.

Customers who are using 3,000 gallons of water are now paying about 15 to 20 percent more on their water bill.

Those using more than the average of about 10,000 gallons have watched their water rates go up about 50 percent.

The TCEQA confirms that the city is no longer in violation and the EPA's enforcement order was closed in December of 2013.

The City of Wolfforth is spending more than $6 million on new technology in order to become compliant.

"This has been an extremely long process, at least 10 years," said Wolfforth City Manager Darrell Newsom.

Newsom said they looked at reverse osmosis, but the water loss was too great, so they decided on a new technology called electro dialysis reversal.
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"It's more of a filtration process...it takes the bad stuff out by filtering and reversing the electrical fields and then back washing," Newsom said.

That technology is not cheap.

"Our citizens have already been paying an extra $23 a month on their water bill. We appreciate the patience of the citizens because they are already feeling the pain in the pocketbook," Newsom said.

The TCEQ said the City of Seagraves, which has a population of roughly 2,400 people, has multiple arsenic violations.

They were referred to the TCEQ in July of 2007 and an EPA enforcement order was issued in March of 2012.

That order is currently being tracked by the EPA.

The TCEQ confirms it provided assistance and conducted a feasibility study to help the city return to compliance.

Seagraves Director of Public Works said they are working with the TCEQ to determine the best way to become compliant. She said they expect to raise water rates by $24.50 beginning in March.

Senator Perry said while safety is important, treating water isn't his number one priority.

"Treating it is the second problem. but the first problem is making sure everybody has it," Perry said.

Like Newsom, city managers across the South Plains warn that water rates will continue to increase.

"We are really only treating the current water resources that we have," Newsom said.

Newsom said he is in the planning stages of bringing in more water that will cause another increase in resident water bills.

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