

Be Proactive
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Throughout the state, and probably the country as well, systems start looking at source water and wellhead protection when they begin having issues with contaminants or encroachments. When these problems occur, systems start looking into ways to protect their water supply from becoming unusable or requiring treatment. If you have ever been involved in the legal process of passing ordinances and getting several entities together to solve a problem, you will realize that this is not an overnight process. Getting wellhead protection zoning in place to prevent or alleviate chemical contamination in the groundwater is a time consuming process. Remember, it took decades for the nitrates or other chemicals to leach down into the groundwater, and it will not be solved in just a week or two.

Systems should start looking into protecting their drinking water supply before they are facing a critical issue. Setting zoning boundaries based on the 20-year time of travel and managing the use of the land within those boundaries to minimize the potential contamination of the groundwater supply are steps that should ideally be taken when the system well is first drilled, but often the “big picture” gets overlooked due to the numerous details that need to be considered in locating, drilling and placing a well in service. When a system has invested several hundred thousand dollars in a new source of drinking water, it just makes sense to protect that source and do everything necessary to extend the useful life of that expenditure.

When looking into starting the process of protecting your drinking water source, it is extremely important to consider the landowners you want to manage in the process. All landowners within the wellhead protection area should be invited to all public meetings concerning the plan and should be invited to give input into how the plan is developed and implemented. Many systems do not want to invite the “farmers” to the meeting because they think they will just complain and be against any attempt to manage their farms by the system. Since this country was founded on the principle of freedom, it is important to consider the rights, thoughts and goals of the owners of the land that you are wanting to manage.

When systems are up front about the goals of the wellhead protection plan and are honestly willing to consider and implement the concerns of the property owners, the public meetings tend to be much more civil and all parties involved can be satisfied with the compromises that are made and show up in the final plan. Wellhead protection plans should not regulate what a farmer can and cannot do on his property, but rather they should promote good farming practices that can be used to achieve the goal of the farmer while still protecting the system’s drinking water supply. The plan can also educate the public and the local farmers of the assistance that is available to promote good farming practices and financial assistance for some of the practices recommended, such as decommissioning abandoned wells and planting buffer zones.

Protecting the future drinking water supply of a municipality is not just a “city” issue, it is a community issue that needs the input and support of everyone living and working within the protection zone. Proactive planning can assist in making this work well and achieve the intended results without unnecessary hard feelings between the town and the local farmers.