

Getting Involved with Source Water Protection

By Doug Buresh, Source Water Specialist

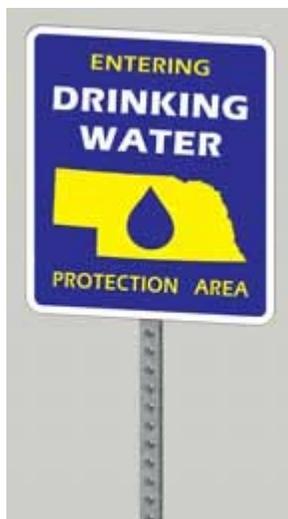
Humans, by nature, are very intuitive creatures. Our ability to be perceptive of our surroundings serves us well in most of the situations we face every day. For instance, it is usually fairly easy to read an unfamiliar dog's intentions. If he wags his tail at you while you're out reading water meters, he's probably a friendly sort, but if he growls or bares his teeth, you'd better beware. Some of our perceptions are learned over time. Depending upon our experiences, we all have preconceived notions about many of the things that we encounter on an everyday basis.

As a young boy, I used to drink from the creek that ran through my grandpa's pasture just like the cowboys did on TV because I didn't know any better. Fortunately, I don't remember ever getting ill from it, or if I did, I never let it slow me down. I've since learned that surface waters harbor microorganisms that cause several types of waterborne diseases, some deadly. Here's an interesting proposition. If these were your only choices, would you rather drink from Clear Creek or Muddy Creek? Any reasonable person would filter the water from either source through a purifier before drinking it, in case any contaminants are present. But what if you didn't have a purifier and still needed a drink? I know I'd take my chances with Clear Creek. My main point is: there are contaminants in both surface water and groundwater that can hurt us.

Most areas of Nebraska are blessed with an abundance of water. And for the most part, the water is relatively clean. The Nebraska Public Water Supply Program Summary Report for 2015 states that only 7 of the 87 contaminants that community public water systems monitor were found in quantities above the Maximum Contaminant Level. That means 80 contaminants for which monitoring was conducted were not found above the MCL in any community water system in Nebraska during 2015. This is a tribute to the dedicated water operators running these systems. We must not become complacent, however. Nitrates, for one, are a serious problem throughout the state. Several communities I've visited have wells on emergency standby use only or are treating their water as a result of past contamination to their source water. It is very costly and time-consuming to construct a new municipal well or develop a new surface water source. The best reason for implementing a source water protection plan is to protect your community's current investment.

As with any community-wide project, someone needs to be the sparkplug to get a source water protection plan started. We, as licensed water professionals, should take the lead in our communities' efforts to protect our source water. Nearly every one of our costumers intuitively wishes to also protect the water they drink and many are willing to help. Communities can also take advantage of the help offered by organizations like The Groundwater Foundation, Nebraska Rural Water, Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and your local Natural Resource District. These organizations do not charge for these services, either. Contact me if you would like to learn more about source water protection. If you like, I'd be willing to give a presentation at one of your board meetings. You can contact me at doug@nerwa.org or 402-480-4196.

Another great way to learn all about wellhead protection is to join the Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network. Started in 2001 by agencies and organizations who support communities developing and adopting wellhead protection programs, this group provides people who work with wellhead protection a place to meet, discuss their work and identify community needs. Funded by the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, the network is facilitated by the Groundwater Foundation, a national organization with international reach, founded and headquartered right here in Nebraska.



The Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network Education Subcommittee is seeking water operators to help explore ideas on developing tools to help spread the message about wellhead protection. One valuable tool recently developed was the change in design of the signs (illustrated above) posted on the edges of wellhead protection areas. They were changed from “Entering Wellhead Protection Area” to “Entering Drinking Water Protection Area” to emphasize the importance of protecting our drinking water. Below is an invitation from the Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network.



Are you a water operator?

Do you work to protect your community’s source of drinking water?

If you answered yes to either of these questions then the Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network is for you! Organizations, agencies, and water operators from across the state come together at Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network quarterly meetings to meet, discuss their work and

identify community needs. Meetings are also an opportunity to get information about hot topics related to groundwater and wellhead protection.

To learn more about the Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network, visit

<http://www.groundwater.org/action/community/newhp.html>.

SPECIAL EVENT: The Groundwater Foundation, facilitator of the Nebraska Wellhead Protection Network, will also be holding training on risk communication in the year ahead. Some situations and issues, if miscommunicated, can create high concern, low trust and outrage within a stakeholder group. The risk communication trainings will walk you through the communication steps needed to turn the situation around. Please let us know if you have an interest in attending one of these trainings.

To get on the mailing list to learn about future Wellhead Protection Network meetings or to share your interest in the risk communication trainings, contact The Groundwater Foundation at info@groundwater.org or (402)434-2740.