

# Customer Water Complaints

By Randy Hellbusch, Circuit Rider

I get a lot of calls from water systems regarding customer complaints about water taste and odor. Many of the complaints are hard to understand because it is only one customer in a certain area or neighborhood. Most of the time, the complaints are about the smell of the water. It smells like rotten eggs! The vast majority of the time the problem can be traced to the water heater. It is often difficult to get the water customer to understand this. The usual comment is, "It isn't just the hot water. The cold water smells too." Anyone who has attended a backflow class understands that after water is heated it expands and, often times, backs up into the cold water lines. This is often hard to explain to the average water customer.

Water heaters are supplied with an anode rod. This is the same concept as cathodic protection in a water reservoir. Anyone who has cathodic protection in their water storage facility knows that it has to be maintained. How many anode rods in residential water heaters do you suppose receive any maintenance? The owner's manual for any water heater states: **The anode rod must be maintained to keep the tank in operating condition. The anode rod in the tank is designed to be slowly consumed cathodically, minimizing corrosion in the glass-lined tank. A hydrogen sulfide (rotten egg odor) may result if water contains high sulfate and/or minerals. Failure to inspect and/or replace the anode rod will result in voiding the warranty.** As the rod is pitted and deteriorates it can actually do more harm than good to the water quality.

Owner's manuals also recommend that a water heater be drained periodically to prevent sediment build-up in the tank. How many of your water customers do you think do this?

Of course it is just natural for a customer to blame the water utility for water quality. In a sense they are right. It is the make up of the water that causes these problems. But in most of Nebraska, the ground water that we use is fairly corrosive and contains minerals, which is practically unavoidable.

A little simple maintenance on the water heater would avoid a lot of these problems. Ask your local plumber if he can get you a copy of an owner's manual for a residential water heater and show it to some of your customers the next time they are having a problem with water taste and odor. Many times the removal of the anode rod will eliminate the problem. But be sure the customer is aware that removal of this rod will void the warranty of the water heater if it is still under warranty. Showing a customer what the owner's manual says is the easiest way to explain the problem.

If NeRWA can help you with this or any other aspect of your water utility, don't hesitate to give us a call.