

National Drinking Water Week

May 7-14, 2000

Traditionally, Drinking Water Week is an opportunity to remind people about the importance of safe drinking water. But after our experience with Hurricane Floyd, no community has a greater appreciation for the importance of this precious natural resource than we do! In September, rapidly rising floodwaters encircled GUC's Water Treatment Plant and challenged our ability to produce an adequate supply of safe drinking water. For 10 long days our water customers were under a precautionary boil water notice. Naturally, after an experience like that, our customers had, and may still have, questions about the long-term effects on their drinking water supply. Here are some of the frequently-asked questions that we've received along with answers that we hope will address any lingering concerns.

Q. _____
Is our drinking water safe?

A. Yes. Water treated at our treatment plant meets the strict standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR). We perform over 100,000 tests annually on samples collected at different phases of the treatment process. Samples are collected both at the plant and at hundreds of sites throughout our distribution system. We go above and beyond by sampling more frequently than regulations require.

We test for bacteriological, inorganic and radioactive contaminants; heavy metals; Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) and Synthetic Organic Compounds (SOCs). Analyses of the tests conducted in our laboratory and in commercial laboratories indicate that water treated by GUC meets all federal and state regulations.

Q. _____
What about the pesticides, fuels and dead animals that were in the floodwaters. How can our drinking water be safe after that?

A. It is true that because of the flood, our raw water source, the Tar River, may have had contaminants that are not usually there. But, also because of the flood, those contaminants were substantially diluted. As a result, the concentration levels did not pose a problem for the treatment process and all tests indicate that we removed any harmful contaminants successfully.

When floodwaters receded enough to allow travel, Federal EPA and State Department of Environment and Natural Resources representatives came to the Water Treatment Plant to provide technical assistance and review plant operating data. All of these officials agreed that after the boil water notice was lifted on September 27, our water was safe and they saw nothing to indicate a problem.

Q. _____
What other kinds of problems did GUC's water system face during the flood?

A. We pump water from the Tar River to the treatment plant, and at one point power had to be shut off to those submerged pumps to protect them from long-term damage. For a time we had to rely on the 40 million gallons of raw water stored in our reservoir. (That's only a two-day supply.) We faced the ironic situation of not having enough water to treat — in the middle of a flood! In addition, we had water main breaks throughout the distribution system. Repairing breaks that were submerged in floodwaters posed a challenge for our crews. So at times more water was being "consumed" than our handicapped plant could produce. That was the reason many customers lost water pressure for a brief period, which reduced their water to a trickle when they turned on their taps. So, not only did we have difficulty getting water to the plant, we also had difficulty keeping up with the increased demand because of the main breaks.

Q. _____
Several days, even weeks, after the floodwaters receded, my water was discolored. It was a yellowish-brown color. Can you explain?

A. The discoloration was caused by high levels of Manganese, an element that occurs naturally in river water and is even in vitamins. High levels of Manganese do not pose a health risk, but it can cause aesthetic problems. It was a challenge to find the right balance of treatment to correct one problem, without creating another. The EPA has two types of standards: primary (substances that pose a health risk) and secondary (substances that cause aesthetic problems). Manganese falls under the secondary standard.

Q. _____
Did GUC's Water Treatment Plant ever shut down during the flood?

A. No. Our treatment plant never shut down and it never stopped treating water. Our employees put forth a heroic effort to keep the plant operating. They worked long hours in extremely difficult conditions. They were determined to keep the plant operating. If we had shut down, it would have been several weeks before the plant could have been operational again. Systems that go "dry" must undergo an extensive series of tests and inspections before they are allowed to resume normal operations.

Q. _____
If I still have concerns about the quality and safety of my drinking water, how can I have it tested?

A. Please contact us at the Water Treatment Plant 551-1562 and we will be happy to collect a sample from your home. We will conduct bacteriological tests in our lab. If you would like additional tests conducted for VOCs, SOCs, heavy metals, etc., we can assist you in obtaining these analyses.

You may also obtain information on water quality issues from the following resources:

EPA Hotline
1-800-426-4791
www.epa.gov

NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)
919-733-2321
www.ehnr.state.nc.us/EHNR/

 **Greenville Utilities**

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