



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

GROUND WATER AWARENESS WEEK

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Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind

BISMARCK, N.D. – It may not always be visible, but ground water is the source of half the drinking water supplies in the United States. Even though it is out of sight, ground water should not be far out of mind.

March 13 through 19 has been designated National Ground Water Awareness Week. In North Dakota, protecting ground water is one of the primary functions of the North Dakota Department of Health's Division of Water Quality. Ground water is found between soil particles and cracks in rocks underground, in formations known as aquifers.

“Most people don't give much thought to where their drinking water comes from,” said Scott Radig, environmental engineer with the North Dakota Department of Health. “But ground water is really the lifeblood of our country, and it is vitally important that we raise the level of awareness of this critical resource.”

Consider, for example, the following statistics from the North Dakota Department of Health:

- Ninety percent of North Dakota community water systems depend on ground water for at least some of their drinking water.
- Sixty percent of all North Dakotans rely on ground water for their primary source of drinking water. For rural populations, the figure is 97 percent.

But the public's level of awareness does not match the level of reliance on ground water.

“For most people, talk about clean water initiatives evokes thoughts of lakes, rivers and streams,” said Radig said. “But the environmental policy decisions we make today have a direct bearing on ground water, and, by extension, our drinking water.”

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Regulations at the state and federal levels protect ground water from such threats as leaking underground storage tanks, improperly designed or installed septic systems, and unsafe disposal of hazardous waste. But local communities also play a role in regulating land uses over sensitive ground water sources and ensuring the proper handling of hazardous materials in order to protect ground water.

Many states, including North Dakota, work together through the national Ground Water Protection Council (GWPC). The GWPC promotes the protection and conservation of ground water resources for all beneficial uses, recognizing ground water as a critical component of the ecosystem.

While organizations like the National Ground Water Association focus on outreach to water well owners and operators, GWPC takes a broader view.

“GWPC was founded in 1983 as a forum for technical and regulatory experts to discuss underground injection control (UIC) issues,” said Mike Paque, GWPC executive director. “But over the years, our board of directors has expanded our focus to include broader ground water issues. Ground Water Awareness Week is a great educational tool for us, and for the states, to bring attention to the importance of protecting this resource.”

For those Americans who get their drinking water directly from water wells, the National Ground Water Association has a simple message during Awareness Week: Get your well tested annually. NGWA notes that an annual test, conducted before peak water-usage months, is the best way to ensure problem-free service and quality water and prolong the life of a well.

But even those who do not have their own water well should pay heed to the importance of safeguarding ground water; after all, half the drinking water in the United States has ground water as its ultimate source.

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