

W.Va. has no plans to test for drugs in water

*By Ken Ward Jr.
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West Virginia utilities don't test drinking water supplies for painkillers, antibiotics or sex hormones, and state regulators say they have no plans to require such studies. "As far as requiring water systems to do that, we've not done that," said Barbara Taylor, director of environmental health services at the state Bureau for Public Health.

Around the country, a vast array of drugs has been found in the drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans, according to an investigation by The Associated Press.

Two-dozen major metropolitan water systems test for these substances, though the results are not readily reported to the public.

The drugs are typically found in very tiny amounts in drinking water, but scientists don't know what the long-term effects on humans might be.

In West Virginia, the state's largest water company, West Virginia American Water does not test for drugs in the drinking water it supplies to 572,000 state residents.

"It's not required as part of our state and federal drinking water regulations," said Jessica Greathouse, West Virginia American's manager of corporate communications.

Nationally, EPA does not require such testing and has not set legal limits for pharmaceutical products in drinking water supplies.

The state Bureau for Public Health regulates the 530 public water systems that provide service to about 1.4 million West Virginians, according to the EPA.

Bill Toomey, unit manager for the bureau's source water assessment and protection program, said the state typically does not require testing or set standards absent some EPA requirement. "Typically, we'll rely on the EPA and their regulatory process," Toomey said. "We just don't have the personnel or funding to go out and establish guidelines of our own."

The AP investigation examined in detail an issue that has been a growing concern for some scientists since a 2000 U.S. Geological Survey found a variety of drugs - most prominently caffeine - in streams around the country.

In West Virginia, the issue has gotten some attention in the Potomac Highlands and Eastern Panhandle. There, scientists have been trying to figure out why male fish have been showing up with female characteristics. Antibiotics found in area waterways - from both municipal wastewater plants and from area poultry operations - are one of the potential causes, according to government studies.

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