

Chair Helm and members of the Committee;

I am highly recommending that this Committee approve of House Bill 2860, which is designed to address a long-standing environmental justice issue – that of informing tenants who live in rentals with private drinking water systems the data they can use to understand the quality of their drinking water before any harm can be inflicted. This bill will require that landlords do some cost-effective but important testing of those drinking water supplies.

We have all heard about the Flint Michigan drinking water crisis, which brought attention to the plight of those users of that public water system. However, without the water quality testing of their drinking water, there might still be a continued public health impact that could last for generations. Users of private wells have no such testing requirement. This bill would ensure that landlords who rent rural properties with wells, provide assurances to their tenants that their drinking water is safe.

This committee should know that there are many areas of rural Oregon that have been identified with nitrate groundwater contamination. As the former Southern Willamette Valley Groundwater Management Area Coordinator for DEQ (2003-2015), I oversaw a massive public awareness campaign to inform residents of the potential for drinking water to be contaminated in the area, and provide free testing and information regarding how to treat your drinking water if it is contaminated. Funding for implementing similar work across Oregon would rely on this Safe Water Well Fund. This is a public health issue of immense importance to those who have to utilize a private drinking water system.

During my 12+ years working in the Southern Willamette Valley, I encountered many situations where drinking water was above health standards. I would like to share two such incidents. The first one occurred in Junction City, where a tenant brought a drinking water sample to a Safe Well Water class being given by OSU Extension. This tenant had recently moved into the area, and her young daughter and her nursing infant also attended the class. Her drinking water levels were over twice the safe standard, and the health of her baby was at great risk. She was scared that her landlord would evict them if she shared those results with them. We were able to work with the tenants to ultimately get a treatment system in place that would allow the family safe drinking water and not risk eviction.

About 5 years ago, a woman outside of Harrisburg brought her infant into her Doctor's office because that child had turned blue. This condition, methemoglobinemia or blue baby syndrome, occurs when susceptible infants ingest water or breast milk with elevated nitrate. Had that Doctor not known of the cause for this infant's condition and how to treat and manage it, there was the potential that the infant could perish. I should share that she was a tenant and was using a private well in an area of high nitrate groundwater contamination.

Your support to get this high benefit and low-cost bill passed would be appreciated. Landlords are already required to provide potable water to their tenants. This bill allows the tenant to be informed that their water has been tested and that the results meet Environmental Protection Agency drinking water standards. This small change of the laws could reduce the risk of miscarriage or infant death due to unintentional, unknowing consumption of well water tainted by elevated nitrate.

Without public education of the importance of well water testing, many assume because the water “tastes great” it is safe. Nitrate has no taste or aroma. The bill also creates a sorely needed Safe Well Water Fund to assist with that public education, providing low-cost private well testing, and following up with technical and financial assistance for addressing or treating groundwater contamination.

I thank you for your attention to this important bill. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Audrey Eldridge
Former Coordinator of the Southern Willamette
Valley Groundwater Management Area