

Quality - How do you know your water is safe?

Drinking water, including bottled water, may be reasonably expected to contain at least small amounts of some contaminants. The presence of contaminants does not necessarily indicate that water poses a health risk. Under the Safe Drinking Water Act ("SDWA"), the United States Environmental Protection Agency ("USEPA") sets national limits on contaminant levels to ensure the safety of your drinking water. These limits are known as Maximum Contaminant Levels ("MCLs"). For some contaminants, the monitoring techniques may be unreliable, too expensive, or too difficult to perform. In these cases, the USEPA establishes treatment technique requirements instead of an MCL. If it cannot be determined that a contaminant is absent, systems operate as if it is present and provide the treatment necessary to produce safe drinking water. USEPA regulations also specify testing and reporting requirements for each contaminant. Something every regulation has in common is a requirement to notify the public if there is a regulation violation. If a regulation is violated the supplier is required to inform the consumers being served by the system. USEPA also requires water suppliers to monitor unregulated contaminants to provide occurrence data for future regulations.

USEPA has established regulations for 88 individual contaminants. These include: 8 microbiological contaminants, 4 radionuclides, 16 inorganic chemicals, 53 organic chemicals, 3 disinfectants, and 4 disinfection byproducts. The SDWA requires USEPA to review and revise each regulation on a regular basis. For example, the MCL for trihalomethanes was lowered from 100 to 80 ug/L (parts per billion) as part of a review completed in 1997. The 1996 reauthorization of the SDWA also requires the USEPA to consider at least 5 new contaminants for regulation every 5 years.

In New York, the New York State Department of Health ("NYSDOH") is responsible for enforcing USEPA regulations. New York State has the option to implement alternative regulations when the alternative is equivalent to or more stringent than USEPA's regulation. In Onondaga County, due to the strength of the local unit, the State Health Department has delegated its primary enforcement and surveillance activities to the Onondaga County Health Department. The County Health Department reviews and approves all treatment plant and distribution system modifications, as well as new construction. It also reviews all our operating and monitoring data for compliance each month. We take a similar, cooperative approach with the Health Departments in Oswego, Oneida, Madison, and Cayuga counties.

We use a combination of internal and external laboratories to conduct over 20,500 tests during a typical year. We operate three state certified testing laboratories: one at our Otisco Water Treatment Plant ("Otisco WTP"), one at our Ontario Water Treatment Plant ("Ontario WTP"), and one at our headquarters building in North Syracuse. We also utilize several outside certified testing laboratories, including PACE Analytical, Life Science Laboratories, Eurofins Eaton Analytical, Analytical Services Inc., and Upstate Freshwater Institute.

Our raw water monitoring programs are specifically designed to address concerns about Otisco Lake and Lake Ontario as they serve as our main sources of supply. In both lakes, raw water intakes extend from a mile to a mile and a half out into the lakes to minimize the effects of near shore currents and run-off. Lab results consistently confirm that levels of organic compounds and heavy metals do not exceed the applicable MCLs. General unfiltered water quality remains high for both Otisco Lake and Lake Ontario. Both sources are monitored more frequently, and for a wider range of compounds, than required by state and federal law.

Importantly, the same degree of caution applied to your tap water source should be used in selecting a bottled water supplier. To that end, a list of certified bottled waters for sale in New York (along with their sources) can be obtained from NYSDOH by calling 1-800-458-1158.

Additional information on contaminants and potential health effects can be obtained by calling USEPA's "Safe Drinking Water Information Helpline" at 1-800-426-4791.