

EPA laments small-town 'drinking' problem

By DINA MILES
Of the Emerald

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has discovered Oregon may have a drinking problem — but it has nothing to do with alcohol.

The problem, cited in a recent article in a news report published by the state environmental council, stems from several community water systems that fail to check for bacteria in the water they serve to customers in the area.

The article explains that about half of the state community drinking water systems are unchecked and that most of those systems serve fewer than 1,000 people. Surprisingly, the EPA cited only one system in Lane County that it claims serves unchecked water, but whether the system is actually guilty of such a practice is a debatable issue.

EPA Spokesperson Bill Titus of Portland says the computer printout points to the Woahink Lake Mobile Home Resort in Florence as one system that has not submitted water samples to be checked. He says the EPA has sent out letters to all water sys-

tems in question since last October, and the EPA tried to reach by telephone those systems which didn't answer the letters.

But a spokesperson at Woahink says the resort has sent a water sample every time it was requested, and the EPA has nabbed the wrong culprits.

"This water has been good for a hundred years," he says. He adds that the EPA "has no reason" to suspect Woahink's water supply, because he has receipts from the EPA to prove the water has been checked and found safe.

He adds that if the water was ever faulty, "someone would have found out immediately." He says he checks the turbidity of the water daily.

So why does the EPA computer still have Woahink on its blacklist?

The spokesperson suspects the bureaucracy of the EPA may be an explanation.

"There's so many hands involved," he says. The Woahink water has been checked time and again, but, he points out, "there's always someone (at the EPA) with a bright idea." Woahink and the EPA have "gone around and around," he says, trying

to set the situation straight, but the EPA consistently has "someone down my red neck."

He says Woahink has never resisted an EPA order to have the water checked. "There's nothing to keep them from testing it," he says, adding he hasn't heard from the EPA for about three months.

Titus acknowledges that some errors may exist in the printout, and his office continues to weed out any wrongly accused systems.

He also laments problems the four-person EPA staff must tackle while trying to identify those systems, because it's time-consuming and costly for such a small staff to travel across the state.

"It's tough to track them down," he says, "without going out of the office." Titus says the EPA discovered some phone numbers were no longer listed for some community systems, while others were disconnected.

"I have a hunch that (the problem) could be inventory errors," he remarks. He notes that because many suspected systems are subdivisions of other major systems, often the recipient of the EPA letter doesn't know who should handle the matter. Consequently, he believes, it is left alone.

In the past, he says, most of the systems which haven't had the water analyzed, eagerly comply with the request, and while court action stands as a final alternative to handle some cases, it is not often used.

"We just ask for compliance" Titus says. "We'd rather get the job done."

Al Symthe of the state health division in Portland, echoes Titus' belief that sometimes the water system officials are uninformed or unaware of the law. He also says few people are actually trying to avoid the law, but rather, "the guy is just not aware of it."

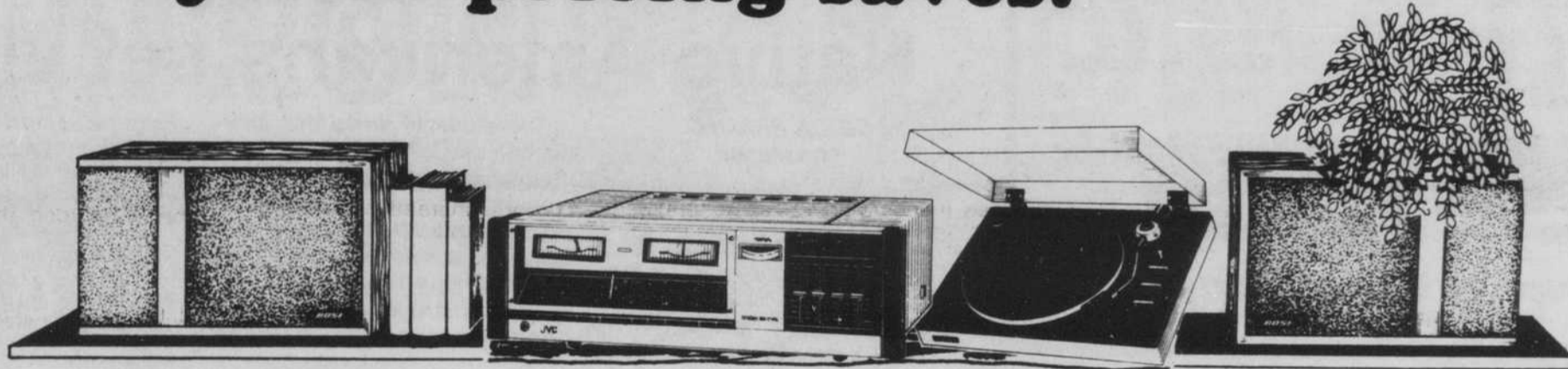
Federal law requires that operators of public drinking water systems collect and analyze samples of the water and send the results to EPA or some state health agency.

The EPA states the bacteriological sampling, analysis and reporting process costs about \$10 a month.

Titus said the maximum penalty for not complying with the law is up to \$5,000 for each day the water system went unchecked.

Other small communities the EPA has cited for investigation include several water districts in Coos Bay, Coquille, Lincoln City, Newport and Gold Beach.

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