

## Water

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making, but once we recognized the public health emergency and information emergency, we've got to do something, at least in the interim," Doherty said on Thursday, July 7.

Doherty had visited homes and helped collect water samples. Following suit, many more local people brought water samples to collection sites in Boardman and Irrigon. Several of these Morrow residents, whose drinking water originates from private wells, have received test results. They have learned that their water contains nitrate levels over 10 parts per million — sometimes much higher, according to Doherty — which makes the water unsafe to drink or use in cooking.

### SPRINGS OF GENEROSITY FLOW TO NEEDY PEOPLE

In response to Morrow's troubles, nearby entities gave assistance or at least offered help. The city of Hermiston, to name one example, promised fresh drinking water to Morrow County.

The city of Boardman, too, stated it would make city water available to people in need. It opened a fire hydrant at Sam Boardman Elementary in Boardman. Sitting in front of the school, Oregon Rural Action community organizers have been distributing clean city water to people. Meanwhile, they have received additional water samples from people for testing, work that will continue into the foreseeable future, they said.

Additional sample collection sites, at the Morrow County Government Center in Irrigon and Boardman Foods in Boardman, have given free water to people, too.

### IRRIGON'S OFFER GOES UNANSWERED

On June 16, Morrow County Emergency Management sent a letter to the city of Irrigon.

"Morrow County would like to officially request to use city water in its efforts to distribute clean cooking and drinking water to the rural residents of Irrigon who have a domestic well within the 97844 ZIP code and whose



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald, File

Cases of water sit Thursday, June 23, 2022, in front of the Morrow County Government Center, 215 N.E. Main Ave., Irrigon.

water has been tested and shown to be above the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) recommended levels of nitrate," states the letter from Morrow County Emergency Manager Paul Gray to Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist.

The Irrigon City Council discussed the request at its June 21 meeting and voted to authorize the sale of city water to Morrow County.

Palmquist sent a letter to Gray on June 22 in which he outlined an agreement for city staff to fill water containers and distribute water.

Water fees would be \$0.025 per gallon. The county also would need to pay a deposit of \$900, with \$750 being refundable, according to a request form that was submitted with Palmquist's letter.

On Thursday, July 7, Irrigon's city

manager said he had not heard back from the county about the matter. Irrigon had not opened a hydrant, and the county's water distribution site in Irrigon was handing out bottled water still.

Doherty stated on Thursday that he didn't hold anything against the city. Irrigon, the commissioner said, has economic concerns of its own, and it's completely within its rights to offer to sell water rather than gift it to the county. Still, Doherty added, the county was pursuing alternative efforts to bring fresh water to local people.

### PRIVATE COMPANY TAKES OVER WATER DELIVERY

According to Doherty, Desert Springs Bottled Water Co., an Echo company, will be delivering water to

people whose wells are tainted.

Though the commissioner stated that the county is contracted with Desert Springs for water delivery, it is yet unknown what the total expense might be. According to Doherty, the county is discovering greater and greater nitrate contamination in an increasing number of homes.

He said he has recently seen test results with nitrate levels in the 50 to 60 parts per million range outside both Boardman and Irrigon.

"Sixty-eight is now, I think, our high," Doherty said. "It was 59."

He said that Desert Springs is scheduling water bottle delivery to around 60 Morrow County homes starting Saturday, July 9, but the number of customers could jump up to 200 within the next week and even more soon after that.

"I don't know the final number," he said.

Given the potential for change, the commissioner stated he couldn't estimate the county's cost.

Each home in need could receive four or five gallons of water every two weeks, he said.

In any case, Doherty said, the company is providing a valuable service. By transitioning toward deliveries by a private company, he said, the county could return county workers to their regular employment.

"They've been fantastic," Doherty said of Desert Springs.

### THE COUNTY LOOKS FURTHER INTO THE FUTURE

Commissioner Doherty said that water deliveries remain a "stopgap." Both deliveries and the pickup sites, he said, will eventually terminate, though he wouldn't give an exact date when that might happen. It could be three months, he said, as the county makes other plans.

A longer-term solution, according to the commissioner, involves installing filters onto kitchen taps in people's homes.

Doherty said the county was receiving its first shipments of filters on Thursday. It will make them available next week. People may, he said, pick them up or schedule a county employee to install them.

He added that there will be no cost to people who need the filters, and he will have more details about availability next week.

### MORROW CONTINUES TO PUBLICIZE THE EMERGENCY

While the county makes further efforts to test samples, distribute fresh water and schedule filter installations, the commissioner said there is work yet to do simply in making people aware of the problem.

Doherty said that, a month into the emergency, he is still encountering local people who are unfamiliar with the problem.

"They're wondering what this well-sampling is all about," he said.

He added that the county is planning to mail information to homes in the county.



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