

# “Test Your Well” Gaining Popularity

## Events Offer Free Nitrate Testing for Private Well Owners

By Jennifer Wemhoff, *The Groundwater Foundation*

**W**ater samples arrive in water bottles, mayonnaise and baby food jars, aspirin bottles, and Tupperware containers at venues such as school gymnasiums, community centers, and county fair booths. Samples are marked, sorted, shaken, tested and returned. Is this a makeshift laboratory?

In some ways, yes. It's part of a popular activity in Nebraska that enables private well owners to “Test Your Well.” Test Your Well events invite private well owners to bring a sample of their well water to be tested for the presence of nitrates at no charge. Events are often held in the evening, a Saturday morning, or during an event such as a county or community fair. Students, Groundwater Guardian team members, and other volunteers administer the tests using a colorimeter.

### Program Evolution

The Test Your Well concept grew out of the “Safe Water Tomorrow through Pollution Prevention Today” project funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Water Act Section 319 Program through the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ). It was developed and nurtured by John Chess and others at the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department (LLCHD) and piloted at Norris High School, located just outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. Students in the Norris Future Farmers of America (FFA) program learned about nitrate contamination and shared that knowledge with well owners at the events.

The project's early days also included Norris FFA students making personal contact with well owners, marking the location of wells using GPS technology, and developing a database of these well locations and nitrate levels in GIS. Students gained hands-on experience in using these technologies and dealing directly with well owners.

LLCHD's program currently works with FFA chapters and other community groups throughout Nebraska to implement Test Your Well events. Continued 319 funds have enabled LLCHD to fund a project coordinator the past two years. The coordinator makes contact with schools, provides training about nitrates and the testing procedure, and helps hold and run the events.

In 2004, 592 samples were tested throughout Nebraska. That doubled in 2005 to 1,323. The program is on its way to surpassing that mark in 2006.

### Innovative Approach

An innovative aspect of the Test Your Well concept is utilizing students, community organizations and other volunteer groups to offer a valuable service in a non-threatening atmosphere. The events also offer teachable moment for well owners. They learn about non-point source contamination, receive information about water quality and pollution prevention, and have the opportunity to ask questions while their water is tested.

Those conducting the event also benefit. They learn about the importance of environmental health, better understand their role in safeguarding drinking water

quality, and have a raised awareness about drinking water that can be passed on in their communities.

Groundwater Guardians in Nebraska have held Test Your Well events in their communities with great success. LLCHD has the longest involvement in the program, and has inspired Grand Island and Keith County to each hold events. Grand Island worked with a local FFA chapter to hold events, and Keith County's Groundwater Guardian team held events for residents living by Nebraska's largest reservoir, Lake McConaughy.

### Interested?

If your community is interested in holding a Test Your Well event, there are a few things you'll need. First, a group of students or volunteers to run the event. Next, a location. Schools are popular venues, but events are also held at community centers, fairs, or VFW halls. You'll also need testing equipment and reagent (a substance which triggers a chemical reaction to gauge the nitrate level). Colorimeters can often be borrowed from a local health department, laboratory, or other group involved in water quality. It's also a good idea to have handouts and pollution prevention materials available for well owners to take with them. Some groups ask local businesses for sponsorship to help in the purchase of reagent, advertising, refreshments, etc.



▲ Norris FFA students marking a well with GPS technology before testing its water for nitrates.

A more detailed description of organizing a Test Your Well event is available at [www.groundwater.org/pe/pack/ai\\_01.pdf](http://www.groundwater.org/pe/pack/ai_01.pdf), or contact the LLCHD program coordinator, Jill Baker, at 402-441-8036 or [jbaker@ci.lincoln.ne.us](mailto:jbaker@ci.lincoln.ne.us).

### Manual in Development

In addition, The Groundwater Foundation, in partnership with LLCHD with funding from the U.S. EPA through NDEQ, is developing a detailed Test Your Well manual. It will provide information needed to organize a Test Your Well event, such as publicity ideas, potential event formats, suggestions for partners and sponsors, background information about nitrate contamination, follow-up activities, and more. The manual is expected to be completed in early 2007. ♦

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