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News
Features
Opinion
Noise
Arts
Screen
Food
Green
Rec
Toons
Odds and Ends
Classifieds
Archives

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Calendar of Events
Dining Guide
Live Music Calendar
Movie & TV Listings

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Boise Band Roster
Location Guide
Menu Guide
Artist Registry

SPECIAL ISSUES

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Coldest Beer in Boise
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BLOG LINKS
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FEBRUARY 1, 2006

DIRTY WATER

Ag pollution in rural wells runs deep

BY [CARISSA WOLF](#)

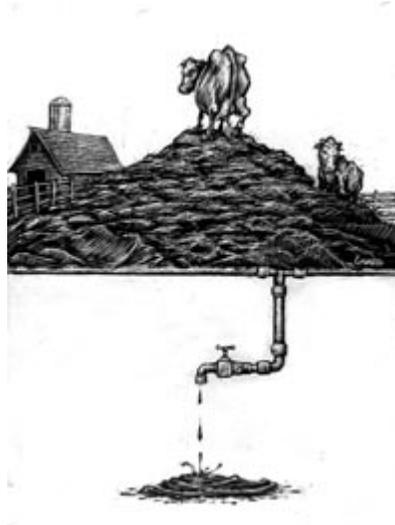
Shirley Tompkins has perfected the military shower: She's in and out in less than five minutes and if she could, she would avoid even a second under the spray pumped from her Weiser well water. "I just soap and get out," she says.

Tompkins, 57, and her Weiser neighbors haul most of their water supply to their homes. They make trips to Costco for deals on bulk water and plenty have come to know the Culligan Water deliveryman well. The bottled stuff offers them some feeling of safety, but it's hard to put a shower in a bottle, they say. So Tompkins gets in, rinses and hopes that the nitrates and pharmaceutical antibiotics and hormones detected in her well water samples simply wash down her shower drain.

No one can tell Tompkins and her neighbors if the hormones and antibiotics could adversely affect their health. No one can say they *won't* harm them, either. Tompkins only knows hormones and antibiotics are part of the molecular melange of her drinking water and that strange, if not downright bizarre, biological phenomena are now part of her rural landscape.

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Recent state and independent tests of ground water wells in Tompkins' neighborhood detected traces of hormones and antibiotics typically used in the treatment and production of cattle. And scientists putting two and two together are looking at the cattle feedlot that sits, in some cases, just several hundred feet from wells testing positive for detectable amounts of hormones and antibiotics.



The presence of pharmaceuticals dictates an obvious solution to Tompkins and her neighbors: Get rid of the source of contamination. But this solution comes with no easy answers, experts say, especially when the science has yet to catch up with the known effects of cattle pharmaceuticals on human and environmental health, and state and federal regulations lag even further behind.

"It's an emerging issue," says Jeff Fromm, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality toxicologist, about the sulfonamide antibiotics and estradiol hormones detected in test wells on and around the Sunnyside Feedlots in Weiser.

"We're not as good at identifying the effects of these as we are at identifying them," Fromm says, noting that ground water hormone and antibiotic detection methods are still in the early stages of development but getting better.

"The primary thing is that (hormones and antibiotics) are indicative of some problem with the feedlot and the Idaho Department of Agriculture is working with (Sunnyside)," he says. "We are not willing to dismiss those chemicals as not being a problem."

The science on antibiotic water contamination doesn't point to an acute health concern, says Diana Aga, assistant professor of Chemistry at the State University of New York at Buffalo. But since long-term health and environmental effects are unknown, the possibility that antibiotic contaminates could contribute to the development of antibiotic-resistant microorganisms is a concern, Aga says. The unanswered questions leave Tompkins, wondering if there's a connection between the start-up of the feedlot and the death of her eight pet reptiles. She wonders why she had a clear mammogram and a year later, her whole breast was invaded by a cancerous mass. Did the reproductive cycle-regulating hormone detected in her water speed the growth of the tumor?

Folks in the cattle production community say feedlots may be no more hazardous to human health than say, a golf course. And the level of antibiotics detected around Sunnyside doesn't exceed therapeutic human dosages.

Seth Matthews, owner of Sunnyside Feedlots, said he uses antibiotics in the production of his cattle but has complied with Idaho Department of Agriculture's requests to install test wells and monitor chemical activity on his property. "We've done everything that is required," he says. Matthews says contaminants in the area of his feedlot could have come from any number of sources including horses and other animals on area pastures.

Lloyd Knight, executive vice president of the Idaho Cattle Association, says members of the association, Matthews included, follow all rules regulating the use of veterinary pharmaceuticals.

"The concern over the use of antibiotics is valid, but I think we need to be careful at who we point the finger." Knight said.

"We made an inference because the antibiotics (detected) are only used in animals," Aga says of the Sunnyside Feedlots area test wells. She says not many studies have found veterinary-use antibiotics in ground water, so she independently researched the Weiser feedlot area wells that reach depths of 15 to 35 feet. Her research, slated for publication in an upcoming issue of the journal *Chemosphere*, details her findings. "We just repeated the same study as the USGS and found the same results," she says.

Animal Feedlots or Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are required to have a mechanism in place to prevent pollutants from seeping water sources. Typically, a lined lagoon or waste reduction method does the trick, and Matthews says he complies with the requirements.

"I don't know why it leaks into the groundwater," Aga says of the contaminates linked to Sunnyside Feedlots.

Area neighbors and environmental watchdogs say it's the history of the feedlot that raised concerns and independent testing of widespread contaminates in the first place.

"Everyone has known for a long time that (Sunnyside) feedlot pollutes the ground water but we haven't had the legal means to address it," says Justin Hayes, program director of the Idaho Conservation League. In 2003, the League filed suit against Sunnyside Feedlots for dumping polluted waste directly into the Snake River. "That is *so* against the law," Hayes says. The feedlot has since been ordered to stop the dumping and undertake a series of pollution prevention improvements. Hayes adds, "It solved the problem of this guy dumping (pollution) into the Snake River but these people don't drink out of the Snake River."

Hayes says the Clean Water Act addresses surface water pollution but doesn't have much bite when it comes to protecting groundwater, leaving the hands of state and federal agencies tied. Feedlots and CAFOs have drawn concern from some lawmakers who say Idaho has become a haven for such operations in recent years because of weak state regulation of the industry.

"The real heroes here are the neighbors looking out for the health of their children. It must be very frustrating to them that the DEQ or EPA or The Idaho Conservation League can't do anything," Hayes says.

Weiser resident Kathy Stone has demanded testing of Sunnyside area wells, lobbied commissioners and local officials, and resigned herself to buying bottled water. But the bottled water doesn't buy her peace of mind. When a family member developed an antibiotic-resistant infection on his leg that lasted a year, Stone, like the scientists, made her inferences.

"The doctors told him, I'm sorry, 'There's nothing I can do for you,' and sent him home," Stone says. "The cost of cattle production from this facility is being spread over a community in health costs, in wells we can't use."

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