



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We conducted this evaluation to assess the ability of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and States to ensure community water systems do not distribute water from contaminated wells to their customers in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA).

Background

SDWA regulates the nation's public drinking water supply. Approximately 6,700 public water systems have at least one water source designated for emergency use. In 2008, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency discovered that one of its public water systems supplemented purchased surface water with contaminated water from an emergency facility without notifying the State agency.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20101012-11-P-0001.pdf

EPA Lacks Internal Controls to Prevent Misuse of Emergency Drinking Water Facilities

What We Found

EPA cannot accurately assess the risk of public water systems delivering contaminated drinking water from emergency facilities because of limitations in Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS) data management. EPA and State officials we interviewed said they were unaware of instances similar to the Illinois situation. However, they also stated that they currently have no way to know whether an emergency facility had been turned on without notice. There is no federal regulatory requirement for EPA or States to oversee or monitor emergency facilities. As a result, neither EPA nor the States know the amount of risk that public water system customers may face from misuse of water from emergency facilities.

EPA and the States do not have common definitions or understandings of what constitutes an emergency facility, and there is no common understanding of when and how emergency facilities may be used, especially with regard to drinking water. States rely on water systems to self-report when they use these emergency facilities. However, that system is voluntary, based on trust rather than a verifiable control. Consequently, EPA cannot accurately assess the risk faced by those served by water systems with emergency facilities.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the Assistant Administrator for Water develop standard definitions for the five facility availability codes, develop standard operating procedures to assist the States with entering data into SDWIS/State databases, and determine whether additional fields are needed in the SDWIS/Federal Version to improve the oversight of emergency facilities. We further recommend that the Assistant Administrator for Water assess the risk associated with the unauthorized use of emergency facilities and, if necessary, develop controls to mitigate that risk.

The Agency neither agreed nor disagreed with our recommendations. EPA acknowledged the concerns raised in this report. To improve oversight of emergency facilities, EPA has opened a dialogue with the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators about the reported data issues and will request that the EPA-State Data Technical Advisory Committee review SDWIS/Federal Version data fields. EPA stressed the challenges associated with assessing health risk from emergency facilities, since risk assumes exposure to a contaminant. We consider these recommendations to be open.