

Department of Health
Environmental Health Programs

Subject: Issuance of boil water orders for public water systems.

Purpose: To provide guidance regarding issuance of boil water orders.

PROCEDURE

Background

The local health jurisdiction or the Department of Health (hereafter the Department) should consider issuing a Boil Water Order (BWO) when the water quality of a public water system has proven to be contaminated with coliform bacteria, Giardia or other microbiological organisms of public health significance, or may become contaminated with these organisms (i.e., from flooding, line breakage, periodic water outages, etc.). When a BWO is justified, it shall be issued to the public water system owner and/or operator (purveyor) directing them to notify their customers that all water should be boiled before consumption.

A public water system or portion thereof is proven to be contaminated with coliform bacteria when repeated check samples show the presence of coliform bacteria. Once the check samples confirm the presence of coliform bacteria, the health authorities should evaluate whether a BWO should be issued. Initially, consideration should be given to running fecal coliform tests on the samples collected.

When the local health jurisdiction anticipates issuing a BWO, it is requested that there be consultation and concurrence from the Department's regional engineer.

Considerations

ISSUING A BWO. Factors which should be considered in deciding whether to issue a BWO include, but are not limited to:

- Presence of fecal coliform.
- Evidence of suspected source of contamination.
- Coliform contamination of source.
- Signs of flood water near or over the source of supply.
- Unprotected and/or vulnerable spring or surface source of supply.
- Shallow well or unprotected aquifer.
- Frequent contamination of other wells in the area.
- Malfunctioning chlorinator.

NOT ISSUING A BWO. Factors which should be considered in deciding not to issue a BWO include, but are not limited to:

- Deep, protected or artesian well source.
- Properly operating chlorinator with detected chlorine residuals throughout the water supply system.
- No signs of contamination at the source, and other sites in the system did not show contamination at the same time.
- Chlorinator has been installed or is operational and in use.

Who Issues

The BWO should be issued by either the Department or the local health jurisdiction according to the joint plan of operation or any other agreement listing the roles of each agency. If no party has been designated to issue the BWO, then the Department should issue the BWO.

The agency issuing the BWO should coordinate with the other agency by a telephone call and a copy of the BWO sent to the other jurisdiction.

In some instances, water purveyors will take it upon themselves to notify customers that water should be boiled even though no BWO has been issued. When a purveyor does issue a notice they should coordinate such action with the appropriate government health authority. Both the local health jurisdiction and the Department should be notified of the action.

Distribution

The objective of the BWO is to ensure that notice is provided to every water user on the affected system. The order should be tailored to accomplish this purpose and should direct the purveyor to provide notice by one or more of the following methods:

1. Personal contact with each user on the system.
2. Direct mail to users.
3. Posting notices at conspicuous locations, best for Group A transient noncommunity.
4. Publishing in the local paper.
5. Notifying over public airways (TV or radio).

Also see WAC 248-54-187 public notification.

Follow-Up

The agency issuing the BWO should follow-up to ensure the water users of the affected water supply have been notified.

Consequences of Notice Issued Pursuant to a BWO

- Both the local and state health agencies must remember that the BWO is a directive to the purveyor to notify customers that the water quality is questionable. The BWO does not require the customers to boil or disinfect their water; they can continue drinking the water without treatment if they desire.
- Local jurisdictions may take appropriate action for restaurants, taverns, other food establishments and any other facility which may provide water to the public. Where authorized, the local health jurisdiction may require these establishments to either close, turn off water delivered to public (i.e., drinking water fountains) or prohibit serving water which has not been boiled or disinfected. For restaurants and other food establishments, this action would include all water used for food preparation, ice making, carbonated beverage service, and drinking water purposes.

When to lift the BWO:

- When two or more sets of samples show no coliform bacteria present.
- When the known emergency has passed.

Who will lift the BWO:

- The agency who issued the BWO so long as the other agency concurs. If the purveyor issues the BWO, then the purveyor can lift the BWO with concurrence from the appropriate agency.

Public Notice Sample

A public notice sample for a BWO is attached. It can be copied and given to purveyors as necessary.

Approved by: DW Lueckty

Date: May 25, 1990