

Private Well Water Focus Group #1: Findings & Next Steps

Background:

On March 30, 2021, the Division of Environmental Health Epidemiology (DEHE) within the Bureau of Epidemiology at the Pennsylvania Department of Health conducted their first virtual focus group via Microsoft Teams with owners of private water wells. Seven participants joined the focus group, representing four counties (Allegheny, Berks, Chester, and Monroe) in three regions of the state (NE, SE, SW). The goal of this focus group was to gain a greater understanding of private well water use among Pennsylvanians, including how private well owners perceive the quality of their well water, how they use it, and what well treatment methods and resources they utilize to ensure the health and safety of their water supply. In an effort to strengthen the state's capacity to respond to water-related issues, the focus group also provided private well water owners a platform to ask questions and voice their safety-related concerns. This work is part of a larger Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funded program to ensure safe water for private well owners, in collaboration with Penn State Extension (Grant #1NUE1EH001414-01-00).

Focus Group #1 Findings Summary:

1. **Confidence in well water quality** – Many private well water owners expressed confidence in their well water quality despite only sporadic testing and less-than-universal water treatment systems. Participants expressed a greater concern over the water quality of public water systems.
2. **Individualized testing practices** – When asked what they test their well water for, responses lacked consensus. Many private well water owners explained how a personal reason or circumstance encouraged them to test for a specific contaminant. For example, one participant shared that they began testing for sodium after their doctor diagnosed them with high blood pressure. Another participant shared that a nearby livestock field motivated them to test for fecal coliform.
3. **Cost and knowledge barriers** – Participants shared that the high cost of water quality tests and lack of access to information regarding best water testing practices (e.g., what to test for or how often to test) hindered them from regularly testing their private well water.
4. **Lack of access to other types of water** – The lack of access to public water prompted six of the seven participants' use of private well water.
5. **Need for greater public information** – All participants said that they wished information regarding well water was more widely distributed and publicly accessible.

Limitations of the Focus Group:

- Lack of participants despite widespread interest (more than 20 individuals had originally reached out about the focus group and 12 had confirmed their virtual participation)
- Lack of representation from different counties and regions
- Restricted to participants with access to a computer and/or phone
- Inability to generalize results to private well water owners in NE, SE, and SW Pennsylvania

Next Steps:

- Partner with local municipalities to promote private well water safety and health education
- Conduct additional focus groups (in person, if possible)
- Update focus group questionnaire in response to first findings
- Identify additional methods to recruit participants and collect study findings