

Group says arsenic standard needs overhaul

LOS ANGELES (AP) — If you drink tap water all your life that contains 5 parts per billion of arsenic, you have a one-in-1,000 chance of getting bladder, lung or skin cancer, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

Yet dozens of water suppliers meet or exceed that average level, and the federal standard is ten times larger, an environmental group said Thursday.

A dozen suppliers in California, six in Arizona and a handful in Texas, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Michigan are among the top 25 that reach or exceed the arsenic level on average, the Natural Resources Defense Council said.

The group studied arsenic testing records from 25 states from 1980 to 1998, based on data from the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency. The other 25 states did not respond to the EPA's request for information.

The top offender was the city's Department of Water and Power which serves 3.6 million consumers. Los Angeles' water had an average arsenic level of 6.9 parts per billion.

DWP's water quality compliance director said that number is outdated.

"We are well within current EPA standards (of 50 ppb)," Pankaj Parekh said, estimating the average at 4.5 to 5 ppb.

"The city has, for the last 10 years, been lowering the level," he said.

Gail Ruderman Feuer, an NRDC senior attorney, said the group sent the EPA a 60-day notice that it intends to sue unless the agency changes its tap water standard for

arsenic to 3 ppb.

The current standard of 50 ppb was adopted in 1942. That level would pose a one-in-100 chance of contracting bladder, lung or skin cancer, the National Academy of Sciences said in 1999.

"Congress told EPA to update the arsenic standard in the mid-1970s, again in the late 1980s and finally set Jan. 1 as the deadline for a proposal. EPA finally delivered a draft of a new standard to the Office of Management and Budget for approval, but it disappeared into a black hole," she said at a news conference.

Even though some water filters can weed out arsenic, "this is potentially an enormous health risk," she said.

No standards exist for bottled water, Feuer added.

After-hours calls to several EPA spokespersons in Washington, D.C., rang unanswered or messages were not immediately returned.

Other water suppliers topping the NRDC's list were the Phoenix Municipal Water System, serving 1 million people, with 5 ppb; El Paso (Texas) Water Utilities, serving 620,000, 6.8 ppb; Southern Nevada Water System, serving 500,000, 5 ppb, and the Albuquerque Water System serving 417,279, 14.2 ppb.

"The reason we're ranked No. 3 has to do with population. It doesn't have anything to do with the amount of arsenic in the water," said John Balliew, environmental compliance manager for El Paso Water Utilities.

"The reason we're No. 3 on the list is because all of the cities that are potentially

impacted by the arsenic problem, we happen to be the third-largest. That doesn't mean we have the highest arsenic percentage, by no means," Balliew said. "We feel right now that there is no definitive study that says what level of arsenic in the water is safe."

The utility, he said, has contributed about \$100,000 toward two current studies, one being conducted by the Association of California Water Agencies, the other by American Water Works Association.

Vince Alberta, spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water Authority, warned about unnecessarily scaring consumers.

"Before jumping to conclusions, wait until other members of the scientific community have the opportunity to evaluate the relevance of this particular study," Alberta said.

The state in brief