

Arsenic in Hopis' water twice the EPA limit, and it may be making them sick

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The tribe estimates about three-quarters of the 7,000 people living on Hopi land are drinking arsenic-tainted water.



(Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

HOPi RESERVATION – When their water doesn't taste right, many residents living on First Mesa will boil it.

Boiling gets rid of the taste of chlorine, which the Hopi Tribe uses to treat its water. But it does nothing about the tasteless, odorless arsenic that could be making tribal members sick.

Zora Polingyumtewa, 76, and Anita Polacca, 92, preferred the water in nearby springs, which sustained the community of Sichomovi on the rocky mesa for as long as they could remember. It wasn't until running water came in the 1980s that the water began to taste odd.

When Polacca's husband and Polingyumtewa's oldest brother got cancer, their minds jumped immediately to the strange-tasting water.

The Hopi Tribe is working to fix the arsenic problem. But officials are not yet sure just how sick it could be making tribal members.

The water Polingyumtewa and Polacca drink is nearing twice the limit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency set in 2001 for arsenic in drinking water. A lawsuit filed against the U.S. government reported arsenic levels more than four times the legal limit in the nearby Keams Canyon system.

Southwest's water crisis hitting Navajo people first – and hardest

(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona/investigations/2015/09/02/lack-snow-brings-hardships-navajo-reservation/31955229/>)

The tribe estimates about three-quarters of the 7,000 people living on Hopi land are drinking the tainted water.

"The cancer risk is clearly unacceptable," said Erik Olson, director of health services for the Natural Resources Defense Council and an expert on arsenic in drinking water.

The Hopi Tribe is doing its best to remedy the arsenic problem, tribal Vice Chairman Alfred Lomahquahu Jr. said. Two new, deeper water wells have been drilled on Hopi land. The EPA also has awarded the tribe about \$6 million through a fund set aside for Native American tribes.

But according to an EPA spokeswoman, the tribe needs an additional \$18 million to \$20 million to complete the project — the kind of money the tribe doesn't have.

"We're trying to do as much as we can with as little as we have," Lomahquahu said.

Scarce funding for fixes

The tribe's troubles began when the EPA lowered the amount of arsenic it would allow in drinking water, from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion. The new standard, which went into effect in 2006, put several systems on Hopi land out of compliance, where they've stayed for years on end.

Fullscreen

The tribe since has struggled to secure the funding needed to bring safe drinking water to local villages that the tribe did not have the money to complete the project on its own.

Natural arsenic poisons Hopi water outlook

"EPA ought to make it their business to help the tribe find the resources," Olson said.

The EPA began working with the Hopis in 2006 to develop two new wells. The wells were drilled in 2013 and reach to 3,000 feet. The hope is that by drilling deeper, the water pumped into Hopi villages will be purer.

"We are employing a number of efforts to reduce the number of tribal systems that are still having arsenic issues," EPA spokeswoman Margot Perez-Sullivan said.

Court dismisses Hopi Tribe's suit against Flagstaff over Snowbowl snowmaking

(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2016/08/16/tribes-suit-vs-flagstaff-snowmaking-dismissed-court/88831010/>)

But fixes to arsenic problems are challenging and expensive.

In the West, arsenic naturally occurs in groundwater. And health effects can be difficult to track, partly because health problems are seen over a lifetime, not within a couple of years.

The tribe agreed with the EPA recently to a formal order laying out a schedule for fixes to be completed by 2020, Lomahquahu said.

Tribal leaders said their main concern is not EPA regulations — leaders are concentrating on providing safe drinking water and caring for the well-being of their residents.

"That should be our basic focus at all times," Lomahquahu said.

Still, frustrations with the federal government led the Hopis to unsuccessfully sue the federal government in 2013 for funds to clean up their drinking water.

Government responsibility?

A lawyer for the tribe argued in the lawsuit that the federal government has a responsibility to provide adequate drinking water to the tribe in part because the government owned and maintained the problematic wells before the Hopis did.

"The tribe simply asks for damages in the amount necessary to provide a permanent and safe alternative source of drinking water to the affected villages," the lawsuit argued.

However, a federal appellate judge dismissed the case last year.

"We understand that water quality on parts of the Hopi Reservation is unacceptable, due in part to insufficient funds for new water infrastructure," the judge's opinion said. But the court stood firm: The tribe had not proven a "money-mandating obligation" that the U.S. allegedly violated.

Lomahquahu conceded the loss was "disappointing," forcing the Hopis to pursue other funding options.

'Now I guess everything's poison'



Lyman Polacca, 81, buys bottled water when he worries about the quality of the drinking water. But he can't do that every day. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

The tribe is now applying for funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development fund to pay for remaining portions of the project. Until the money comes through, tribal authorities must educate tribal members.

Concern over the arsenic has grown among tribal members as they hear more about the arsenic, Lomahquahu said. Authorities have done what they can to spread the right information to people affected.

But education won't change the fact that until the new wells are up and running, the arsenic is present in the drinking water. Many of those living on the reservation said they don't spend much time dwelling on it.

"Maybe we're used to it, so it doesn't bother me," Polacca said.

A study exploring the possible link between high cancer rates on the Hopi reservation and arsenic in drinking water was recently launched at the University of Arizona.

Lyman Polacca, 81, buys bottled water when he worries about the quality of the drinking water. But he can't do that every day.

It was almost better when he didn't know arsenic was in the water, he said. Then, he didn't worry.

"Now I guess everything's poison," he said. "I don't know how much we can consume and still survive."

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