



PRESS RELEASE

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OCCA announces results of countywide groundwater testing program; full report to be unveiled at Lakes Festival

OTSEGO COUNTY, NY – The results of the Otsego County Conservation Association’s “*What’s In Our Water?*” program are in and, following a detailed analysis, two things are clear. First, the overall quality of Otsego County’s drinking water is very good. Second, and perhaps more significant, Otsego County now has a strong, legally defensible baseline of its water chemistry by which contamination can be detected.

“We look at this as an insurance policy of sorts,” said OCCA President Vicky M. Lentz. “We knew we had an abundant supply of good, clean water here. The data now backs this up and the collection and testing protocols are legally certifiable.”

In August of 2013, Community Science Institute – contracted by OCCA following a competitive bidding process – began sampling and testing private and municipal water wells in Otsego County. The series of 84 tests was completed in mid-November. The results of these individual tests have already been shared with participating property owners and municipalities, and now a cumulative analytical report has been compiled and will soon be released.

The report, prepared by Dr. Les Hasbargen of SUNY Oneonta’s Catskill Headwaters Research Institute, includes statistical summaries of the test data and a comparison of chemical parameters in WIOW-sampled wells with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s maximum contaminant levels for those parameters.

According to Hasbargen, OCCA “has established a strong baseline of chemical constituents in local groundwater that can be used to assess possible contamination by shale gas extraction and/or other industrial activities.”

Made possible by private donations, OCCA’s groundwater testing program provided certified baseline testing of drinking water wells in all 24 of Otsego County’s townships. The goal of OCCA’s WIOW program was to collect information on drinking water across Otsego County to provide a defensible chemical baseline against which changes to water chemistry from contamination can be determined. Wells were tested for a total of 21 parameters – including signature chemicals typically associated with hydraulic fracturing for natural gas or other heavy industrial activity – which may or may not already be present in groundwater.

“Overall, groundwater across the county is relatively fresh (dilute) with low concentrations of dissolved inorganic elements and organic compounds,” Hasbargen reported. “The absence of chemical compounds often used in hydraulic fracturing provides a strong comparative baseline if such activities do take place in the future in Otsego County.

However, Hasbargen pointed out that methane was detected in more than half of the wells tested, so its presence is of limited use for detecting contamination from natural gas extraction activities.

Above and beyond a legally defensible baseline, the results of the WIOW program have additional value. The information collected via this project contributes to growing countywide and regional water quality databases which will, over time, lead to a better understanding of groundwater flow systems and mapping of aquifers.

“Relatively little is known about our groundwater,” said OCCA Executive Director Darla M. Youngs. “Most private well owners only test their water when it tastes bad or smells funny. This series of tests – which, for many, would have been cost prohibitive – helps identify common chemical components and any concentrations of concern.”

For example, while data supports that the overall quality of the county’s drinking water is good, 14 percent of wells tested in the WIOW program showed levels of turbidity (cloudiness) which exceed the maximum contaminant levels established by USEPA.

“Higher turbidity levels are often associated with higher levels of disease-causing microorganisms such as viruses, parasites and some bacteria. Clearly, it is a good idea to filter water from private wells,” Hasbargen advised.

“Virtually none of the samples contained detectable quantities of organic molecules associated with gas drilling activities,” Hasbargen said, “implying that the natural background is very low, and so future detection of such molecules is likely to be a result of human-caused contamination.

“An ensemble of chemical parameters including total dissolved solids, alkalinity, specific conductance, pH, and chemical oxygen demand greatly strengthen the perception that Otsego County has an abundance of high quality drinking water,” he wrote.

The full “Report on Drinking Water Chemical Analyses for OCCA’s *‘What’s In Our Water?’* Campaign” will be unveiled and made available to the public at the Otsego Lakes Festival on Saturday, July 12 at Lakefront Park in Cooperstown. For more information, e-mail admin@occainfo.org.

OCCA is a private, non-profit environmental membership organization dedicated to promoting the appreciation and sustainable use of Otsego County's natural resources through education, advocacy, resource management, research, and planning. For more information on OCCA, or to support programming, call [\(607\) 547-4488](tel:6075474488) or visit www.occainfo.org.