

# NEW ONLINE DATABASE PROVIDES MISLEADING INFORMATION FOR TAP WATER CUSTOMERS

By Monica Wurtz, Technical Assistant, Kansas Rural Water Association

The Environmental Working Group ([www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)) recently released an online database of drinking water quality supplied by public water systems. The information is misleading because it uses a much lower "health guideline" rather than the contaminant levels established by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act as the recognized standard for safe drinking water.

In a recent article published by *The New York Daily News*, as well as by numerous other national publications and media, readers are warned of "dozens of harmful contaminants in tap water". Who is their source for information? It's the Environmental Working Group or EWG. EWG developed an online database ([www.ewg.org/tapwater](http://www.ewg.org/tapwater)) which allows citizens to enter their zip code and search for their public water system "to find out exactly which contaminants are in their local water supply". Kansas Rural Water Association (KRWA) started to receive phone calls and emails from water systems and citizens concerned by the information they read on [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org), so KRWA decided to investigate EWG's tap water database and the accuracy of the data provided.

KRWA randomly selected five different public water systems (PWS) in Kansas and conducted a search for each system on EWG's tap water database. Here's what we found:

- For each PWS, ewg.org provides a water quality report which includes the name of the system, population served, source of water and a list of contaminants that were detected above EWG-selected "health guidelines" using data from 2015.

- For each contaminant that was detected above the "health guidelines," the report includes the contaminant level that was detected by the utility and compares that level to state and national averages as well as the "health guideline" and, for some contaminants, the legal limit or Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL).



- ★ Jefferson RWD 13
- Public Wholesale 8
- Montgomery RWD 9
- La Crosse
- Washington



- The report also provides a description of health risks associated with each contaminant and provides links to filters that can be purchased to remove the contaminants from tap water.
- Of the five PWS reports that were viewed on ewg.org, the majority of the data that was collected by the utilities matched data provided on the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's Drinking Water Watch database.

- The issue with the EWG report is that contaminants are listed under a PWS if it was detected above a "health guideline". EWG indicates the source for each "health guideline", which is generally much lower than the legal limit or MCL. For example, Total Trihalomethanes (TTHM) has a "health guideline" of 0.8 ppb (or  $\mu\text{g/L}$ ) defined by the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment as a draft public health goal to protect against cancer. The MCL for TTHM is 80.0 ppb (or  $\mu\text{g/L}$ ). So for one of the PWSs that KRWA reviewed,

Jefferson County RWD No. 13, the system's TTHM result of 29.0 ppb is much lower than the MCL but is above EWG's "health guideline". In fact, Jefferson County RWD No. 13 has eight contaminants listed on the system's report, but at the top of the report in small print it states that "this water utility was in compliance with federal health-based drinking water standards."

In summary, KRWA's advice to public water systems and their customers who that choose to look up their PWS's data on EWG's tap water database – don't let it scare you. Go ahead, look up your water system and look through the data that is provided; it is most likely correct. But remember that PWSs are required to maintain compliance with MCLs, not arbitrary "health guidelines". If any water system has exceeded the MCL for a contaminant, the PWS is required to notify its customers and describe the situation, any possible health effects, and how the water supplier has fixed or will address the problem.

Customers of public water systems are also encouraged to contact their PWS for a copy of the system's annual Consumer Confidence Report for the most recent and accurate water quality data. KRWA staff are also available to provide additional information concerning drinking water quality, regulations, operation and maintenance and funding for improvements. Contact KRWA by calling 785.336.3760 or see the Association's web site at [www.krwa.net](http://www.krwa.net).

Jefferson Co. RWD No. 13	EWG.org Result	Kansas Drinking Water Watch	Health Guideline Selected by EWG.org	MCL
Bromodichloromethane	8.80 ppb	8.80 ppb	0.4 ppb	One of TTHMs
Bromoform	5.30 ppb	5.30 ppb	5.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Chloroform	3.9 ppb	3.9 ppb	1.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dibromochloromethane	11.0 ppb	11.0 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dichloroacetic Acid	1.8 ppb	1.8 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of HAA5s
Combined Radium (226 & 228)	Detected	0.3 pCi/L	-	5 pCi/L
Total Trihalomethanes (TTHMs)	29.0 ppb	29.0 ppb	0.8 ppb	80.0 ppb
Trichloroacetic Acid	0.61 ppb	0.61 ppb	0.5 ppb	One of HAA5s

City of LaCrosse	EWG.org Result	Kansas Drinking Water Watch	Health Guideline Selected by EWG.org	MCL
Arsenic	2.4 ppb	2.4 ppb	0.004 ppb	10 ppb
Bromodichloromethane	5.0 ppb	5.0 ppb	0.4 ppb	One of TTHMs
Bromoform	37.0 ppb	37.0 ppb	5.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Chloroform	1.4 ppb	1.4 ppb	1.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dibromochloromethane	18.0 ppb	18.0 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dichloroacetic Acid	3.5 ppb	3.5 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of HAA5s
Combined Radium (226 & 228)	Detected	1.0 ppb	-	5 pCi/L
Total Trihalomethanes (TTHMs)	62.0 ppb	62.0 ppb	0.8 ppb	80.0 ppb

Public Wholesale No. 8	EWG.org Result	Kansas Drinking Water Watch	Health Guideline Selected by EWG.org	MCL
Bromodichloromethane	8.4 ppb	8.4 ppb	0.4 ppb	One of TTHMs
Chloroform	19.0 ppb	19.0 ppb	1.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dibromochloromethane	2.0 ppb	2.0 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dichloroacetic Acid	20.0 ppb	20.0 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of HAA5s
Total Trihalomethanes (TTHMs)	30.0 ppb	30.0 ppb	0.8 ppb	80.0 ppb
Trichloroacetic Acid	8.0 ppb	8.0 ppb	0.5 ppb	One of HAA5s

Montgomery Co. RWD No. 9	EWG.org Result	Kansas Drinking Water Watch	Health Guideline Selected by EWG.org	MCL
Bromodichloromethane	21.7 ppb	24 ppb*	0.4 ppb	One of TTHMs
Chloroform	37.3 ppb	30.5 ppb*	1.0 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dibromochloromethane	10.9 ppb	13.7 ppb*	0.7 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dichloroacetic Acid	13.6 ppb	12.58 ppb*	0.7 ppb	One of HAA5s
Total Trihalomethanes (TTHMs)	70.7 ppb	69.75 ppb*	0.8 ppb	80.0 ppb
Trichloroacetic Acid	10.3 ppb	9.6 ppb*	0.5 ppb	One of HAA5s

\*4 quarter average

City of Washington	EWG.org Result	Kansas Drinking Water Watch	Health Guideline Selected by EWG.org	MCL
Bromodichloromethane	0.8 ppb	0.8 ppb	0.4 ppb	One of TTHMs
Dibromochloromethane	1.7 ppb	1.7 ppb	0.7 ppb	One of TTHMs
Nitrate	6.1 ppb	6.1 ppb	5.0 ppb	10.0 ppb
Combined Radium (226 & 228)	Detected	1.7 pCi/L	-	5 pCi/L
Total Trihalomethanes (TTHMs)	3.6 ppb	3.6 ppb	0.8 ppb	80.0 ppb

KRWA reviewed the data provided by EWG.org for the above five randomly selected water systems. The standard used by EWG.org was much lower than the maximum contaminant levels established by the Safe Drinking Water Act.