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January 8, 2009
For Immediate Release

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NMED Advises San Mateo Creek Basin Private Well Owners in Cibola and McKinley Counties That Water May Contain Contaminants from Naturally-Occurring Ore and Processes from Past Uranium Mining

NMED Hosts Water Fair, Urges Residents to Test Water, Schedules Session to Answer Residents' Questions

(Santa Fe, N.M.) The New Mexico Environment Department advises people with private wells within the San Mateo Creek Basin in Cibola and McKinley counties that their water may contain contaminants from naturally-occurring ore deposits within the "Grants uranium belt" and from former uranium mine and mill processing of those deposits in the area. Well water in the area could exceed federal and state drinking water standards for several contaminants that could pose health problems for residents.

Contaminants may include chloride, gross alpha, lead, manganese, nitrate, pH, radium₂₂₆ and radium₂₂₈, selenium, sulfate, total dissolved solids and uranium. Other contaminants detected for which federal drinking water standards have not been established include, iron, molybdenum, thorium₂₃₀, and vanadium (see attached health advisory).

"We are working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to assist residents in the area with concerns related to their drinking water," said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. "Naturally occurring ore and past mining practices contributed to the contamination of water in the area. We urge residents to test their well water and will offer our assistance and expertise to ensure well owners have the information they need."

Health risks for long-term exposure to gross alpha, lead, nitrate, radium, selenium, sulfate, thorium, and uranium contaminants that have been documented could include cancer, kidney, spleen, and liver damage, birth defects, systemic mineral imbalance and digestive problems.

"NMED has and will continue to work with federal regulators and potentially responsible parties in the area to address this issue," said NMED Water and Waste Management Division Director Marcy Leavitt.

NMED is in the early stages of investigations within the San Mateo Creek basin to better understand, and potentially address, possible ground water contamination from past uranium mining and milling activities.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has required remediation of ground water contamination at the Homestake Mining Company uranium mill site since the 1970s. Recent ground water quality data from samples collected in and near abandoned uranium mine shafts in the Ambrosia Lake area also indicate the occurrence of ground water contaminants in concentrations exceeding maximum contaminant levels and state drinking water standards within this area of the basin.

NMED will hold water fair to test well water from private wells only in the San Mateo Basin from noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 21 at Cibola County Building, 515 High St. in Grants. Water from public drinking water systems will not be tested because those supplies are routinely tested and deemed to be safe pursuant to the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act. In addition, the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 6 will hold a community meeting regarding a Remedial System Evaluation recently completed at the Homestake Mining Company Superfund Site from 6 to 8 p.m. the same day, Jan. 21, at the same location, Cibola County Building, 515 High St. in Grants.** NMED scientists and staff members will also be available to answer questions about potential well water contamination, the advisory and other efforts the area.

How to collect the water sample for the water fair:

- Use a clean glass or plastic container (at least a quart).
- Do not use containers that have a strong odor, such as pickle jars.
- Let the water run for a couple of minutes before collecting the sample.
- Collect the sample as close to the time of testing as possible.
- Cover the container with a clean lid.
- Collect the sample before any water treatment systems such as reverse osmosis, water softener, or carbon filter.
- Analysis will be performed the same day, and you can either pick up results or have them mailed to you.
- In addition residents with private wells within the San Mateo Creek Basin (area covered by the health advisory) may sign up to have their well their wells sampled by NMED Staff at a later date for more extensive list of analytes including uranium.
- Drinking water at the fair will be tested for electrical conductivity, iron, fluoride, nitrate, pH and sulfate.

Information regarding contaminants in drinking water can be found at EPA Web site, <http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwh/>, and at the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry Web site, <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>. Other contaminants listed above may cause only aesthetic effects to the appearance or taste of ground water.

For more information about public water supply systems, please contact:

New Mexico Environment Department
Drinking Water Bureau
Toll Free: (877) 654-8720 (toll-free)
<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/dwb/index.htm>

For more information about ground water abatement activities, please contact:

New Mexico Environment Department
Ground Water Quality Bureau
(505) 827-2918
<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/gwb/gwqbhome.html>

For more information about the potential health effects of ground water contaminants, please contact:

New Mexico Department of Health
Epidemiology and Response Division
(800) 879-3421 (toll-free)
(505) 827-0006
<http://www.health.state.nm.us/index.html>

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