



ONLINE AVAILABILITY OF SOURCE WATER DATA

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Recently, I attended the WaterPro Conference, the annual conference of the National Rural Water Association. One of the talks I heard was given by staff members of the USEPA's Office of Groundwater and Drinking Water. They demonstrated a beta version of an online mapping tool that they are developing termed DWMAPS (Drinking Water Mapping Application for Protecting Source Waters). A primary impetus for creation of this tool were the Elk River spill in Charleston, West Virginia and the Lake Erie algal bloom near Toledo, Ohio. Both of these source water emergencies resulted in water supply disruptions that each lasted several days. For the USEPA mapping tool, there will be various levels of access. For example, the general public will not be able to see public water supply locations. Utility personnel will be able to see their sources only.

The concept of an online source water mapping application or publishing source water data online is not new. Some of my fellow source water protection specialists indicate that their states have had such online mapping applications for years. I have researched what states neighboring New York do with respect to online source water data. In Massachusetts, you can go online and map public water supply sources (intakes and wells), protection areas, potential contaminant sources, etc. Vermont has a very similar online mapping application. Connecticut has only published an online map of public water supply watersheds. In New Jersey, source water assessment reports can be downloaded. Pennsylvania has an online GIS based website and mapping tool, but does not display public water supplies for security reasons.

In contrast, New York State does not have a comprehensive online GIS based website and mapping tool and does not publish source water data online (including source water assessments). The closest thing we have to an online mapping tool related to source water protection is that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) has several interactive online maps that are available on its website. The most applicable of these to public water systems is the Environmental Facilities Navigator. It displays the location of superfund sites, facilities with significant SPDES discharges, active solid waste management facilities, facilities discharging certain types of wastes, large water withdrawals, etc.

So some states openly publish source water data online and others like New York do not. It is interesting to me how the debate between security concerns vs. the public right to know and encouragement of source water protection has been resolved in the various states. Here in New York, the location of source water facilities is not only unavailable online, I have been told that such data is unlikely to be released through a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request due to security concerns. One of my colleagues

in a state that does not make source water data available to the public online argues that this amounts to censorship. I do not feel that strongly about it, but I do feel that some source water data should be made accessible to the public. Having the boundaries of watershed and source water assessment areas available to the public would be very helpful for protection purposes and would not compromise security in my opinion. In addition, water system officials and local leaders should have ready access to the location of all public supply intakes and wells in their area in order to effectively conduct planning to minimize the impacts of future spills and to coordinate emergency response activities in the event of such an emergency.

My hope is that New York State explores what other state primacy agencies are providing online to the public with respect to source water data. At the very least, perhaps they can afford some online access to source water data for system personnel, local officials, and technical assistance providers that are involved with source water protection and/or emergency response.

If you have any thoughts about this topic that you would like to share with me, please contact me at winkley@nyruralwater.org