



washington dc update

Texas Drinking Water Regulator Responds to NY Times Article

December 9, 2009

Just the headline of the recent New York Times piece gives the misguided slant:

“Millions in U.S. drink dirty water, records show Only 6 percent of systems that broke law since ‘04 were fined, punished”

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34323634/ns/us-news-the_new_york_times/

The WESTCAS membership continues to impress me with its knowledge of issues, both regulatory and legislative. One of WESTCAS newer members read the recent New York Times sensationalized editorial on the SWDA violations (see hyperlink), and thought to ask his State regulator’s opinion about it. Gary Goodman with the Bell County WCID#1 in Texas had the very practical idea, as opposed the NY Times, of asking his District’s immediate SWDA regulators, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), about the article. Specifically, Gary asked:

“My question is what is viewed as a violation and what is punishable by a fine. I have always felt that fines were levied against willful violators who refuse to upgrade their system to come into compliance and the typical violator was not fined as long as they met the goals of the state’s compliance timetable to upgrade their system.”

I am pleased to report that the TCEQ response recognized the overwhelmingly good job that the public drinking water systems in Texas and throughout the country do on a daily basis. After reading the article, Alicia C. Diehl, Ph.D., Drinking Water Quality Team Leader, with the TCEQ responded:

“I know that not everything is perfect, but it is simply not so bleak as the NYT makes it out to be.

I think that the concept that PWSs provide good water in order to avoid fines is stupid. The people running PWSs are generally well aware that they are protecting public health. How levying fines on them would help is a mystery. Actually, other than protecting public health, the thing that most strongly motivates PWSs is avoiding situations that require public notice. It is very difficult to have to tell customers you did something wrong!

I think that that reporter, and a lot of other people, need to stop thinking of pollution in the same way as drinking water. Polluters pollute; PWSs PROTECT public health. Can you imagine how many people would be sick if the PWSs were NOT doing what they do?”

After hearing so many criticisms and misinformation from the media, it is refreshing to hear this opinion from the folks that actually do the job of public drinking water regulation—and it was good that a WESTCAS member asked the question!

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