



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We conducted this review in response to a hotline complaint alleging that a small community's only source of drinking water had been contaminated by adjacent saltwater disposal operations. The complaint also alleged that Federal and State officials had not provided assistance obtaining safe drinking water.

Background

In 1996, residents in a small community in Panola County, Texas, complained of drinking water discoloration, stained kitchen and bath fixtures, and gastrointestinal problems after consuming water. Most residents had begun buying bottled water or obtaining water from relatives. Between 1996 and 2003, residents said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Texas representatives took no action to help identify a permanent source of safe drinking water. In 2003, Texas found the groundwater was contaminated and advised residents to not use the water for domestic purposes.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2007/20070911-2007-P-00034.pdf

Complete Assessment Needed to Ensure Rural Texas Community Has Safe Drinking Water

What We Found

A Panola County resident first alleged in 1996 that drinking water for residents in a small community in the county was contaminated. However, State officials did not confirm the problem until 2003, when they told the residents to not use their water for domestic purposes. In September 2005, EPA began providing, and continues to provide, bottled water to the affected residents. EPA and the State have taken additional steps to assess the source, severity, and extent of contamination.

In March 2005 the State requested that Basic Energy Services, the site operator, assess groundwater, and in October 2005 the State requested that Basic Energy Services install additional monitoring wells. In March 2006, because Basic Energy Services' performance was inadequate, the State indicated it would take enforcement action. However, we found no evidence that the State took enforcement action. Although the State has installed additional groundwater monitoring wells in the area, the full extent and source of contamination is still not known. Region 6 is confident that the contamination does not originate from injected waste. Even so, the State has initiated additional assessment action under State programs.

Responding to a petition filed by Panola County residents in November 2006, EPA is conducting an assessment to determine if the site qualifies for cleanup under EPA's Superfund program. Further, in its June 29, 2007, response to our draft report, EPA said that it intends to use removal action funds to pay for constructing a water line that will provide the residents with access to the Panola Bethany Water Supply Corporation. EPA decided to evaluate and fully assess the contaminated groundwater under its Superfund program, as well as to have the residents connected to the water system. In response to our suggestion that more frequent communication with the community would be beneficial, in 2007, the Region acted to keep the community informed. Region 6 stated they have held community meetings and Superfund staff have met with the citizens individually in preparation for additional site investigations. We commend the Region for these communication activities and encourage their continuance.