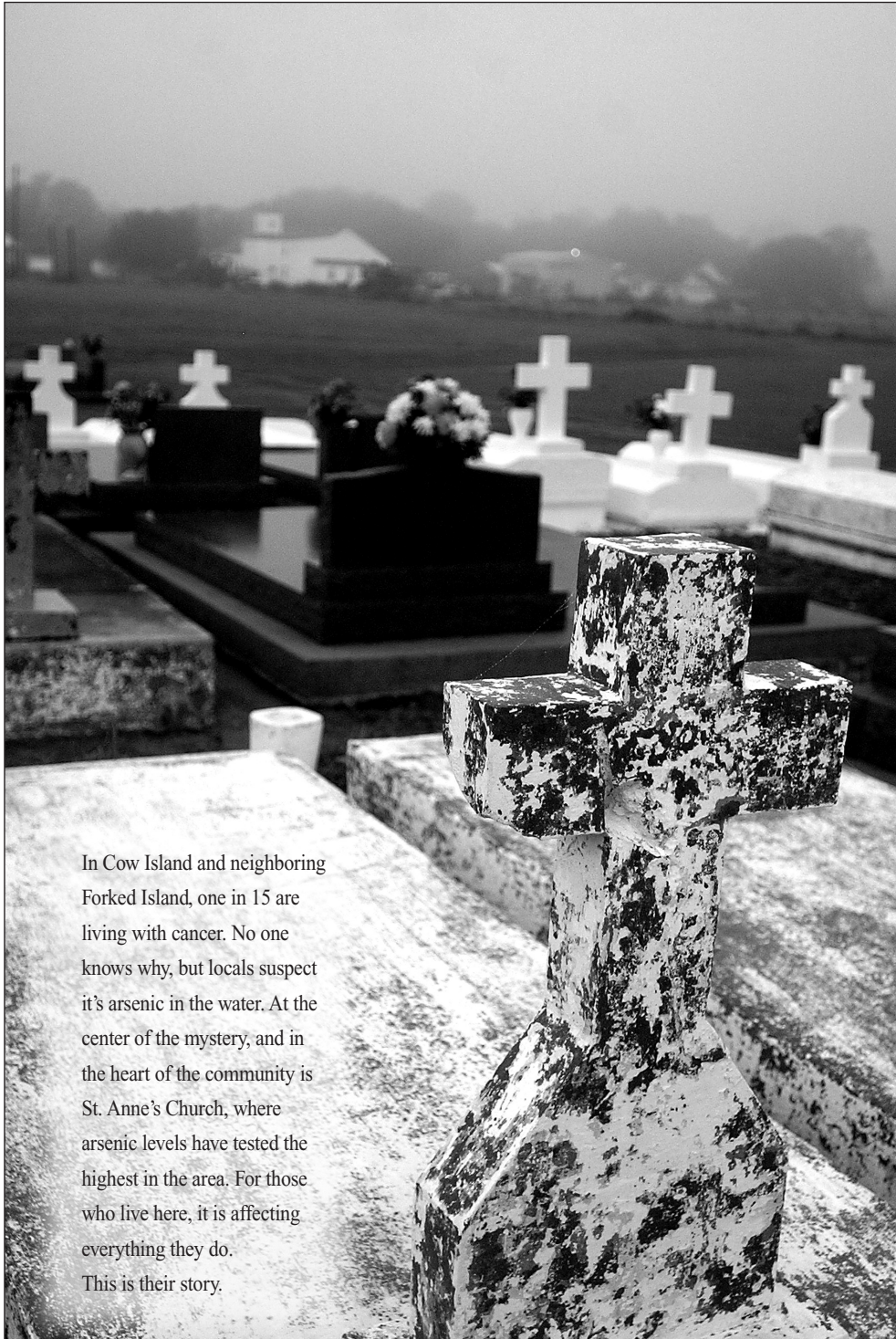


POISONED WATER

COW ISLAND: GOD'S COUNTRY CONTAMINATED



In Cow Island and neighboring Forked Island, one in 15 are living with cancer. No one knows why, but locals suspect it's arsenic in the water. At the center of the mystery, and in the heart of the community is St. Anne's Church, where arsenic levels have tested the highest in the area. For those who live here, it is affecting everything they do. This is their story.



Dangerous levels of arsenic are in a one-mile radius • Page 3



A priest preaches water quality from the pulpit • Page 5



Old cattle dips may be source of pollution • Page 8



Residents wonder when clean water will come • Page 9

Don't drink or cook with the water

Tests by the Department of Environmental Quality and The Daily Advertiser show reason for concern for Cow Island residents

Jan Risher
Kayla Gagnet

An international expert on arsenic in groundwater says the Environmental Protection Agency — for a decade — ignored research on unsafe levels of arsenic because it's not a problem that affects a lot of people in the United States and there is no clear-cut culprit.

"The EPA, although the information was public, did nothing for 10 years," said Richard Wilson, physics professor at Harvard University. "There was no one pushing them. The environmental community wasn't pushing them because there was no one responsible — there was no one to sue."

Wilson has done arsenic groundwater analysis of 158 counties nationwide. He also works to regulate arsenic levels in drinking water around the world in the Arsenic Website Project he maintains. He has not personally been involved in the Cow Island complaints but says the story is a familiar one.

"My recommendation is two water supplies — one for drinking and cooking and one for everything else," Wilson said. "You certainly shouldn't cook in it and you shouldn't drink it. Cooking with it is worse than drinking it."

Wilson says arsenic in groundwater will not dissipate over time. Few will argue the answer: a regional water system, which means parish water lines.

The evidence is building that residents in Cow Island need help. Results of *The Daily Advertiser* and state Department of Environmental Quality tests for arsenic in well water indicate at least 10 households in the Cow Island and Forked Island areas have unsafe water.

■ The highest level found in both the



Kayla Gagnet

Kyle Blanchard with the state Department of Environmental Quality tests the temperature, pH and specific conductivity of water from a well in Forked Island on Nov. 5. Blanchard said he needed consistent results from three consecutive buckets of water before sampling for arsenic.

DEQ's and *The Advertiser's* testing was at St. Anne's Church Rectory. DEQ's test at St. Anne's showed 60 parts per billion (ppb) and *The Advertiser's* showed 50.8 ppb.

■ Five Oaks Grocery Store — the primary grocer in town — also had high results in both tests; DEQ's results tested at 59 ppb and *The Advertiser* tested at 43 ppb.

Variance in tests results "seems to be fairly common" according to Clay Chesney, geologist and coordinator with the Sole Source Aquifer Program in the EPA's Dallas office. "With the shallower wells, it seems to be more common. The rain water can go down and dilute. Contaminants are not distributed in the groundwater evenly."

Wilson agrees.

"If it was natural, it would be all over an aquifer. If it was caused by a cattle dip, it would be where it had gone in the last little while," Wilson said.

In January 2001, with the Safe Drinking Water Act, the EPA adopted a new standard requiring public water systems to comply with arsenic levels not to exceed 10 ppb by January 2006; the previous standard was 50 ppb.

Private wells are not subject to the EPA's 10 ppb standard, but the standard is used to determine what's safe for drinking water — from a public system or well. Health officials are divided on what levels are safe to drink.

"There's not a threshold set for what levels of arsenic would have an impact on human health," said Bob Johansson, spokesman for the state

Department of Health and Hospitals.

Radina LeMaire's home with fiancé Brian Hollier is connected to the Five Oaks Grocery store they run. She said she was surprised when a DEQ official told her future mother-in-law that 59 ppb wasn't too high.

"It came back around 59 ppb and they told her 'That's nothing to worry about.' I said I wished he would have talked to me or Brian," LeMaire said. "They told her that it wasn't great and it wasn't bad."

But Lynda Knobloch said 59 ppb is enough to cause concern over a period of years. Knobloch is a Wisconsin public health official who has done studies on the health effects of arsenic in drinking water.

"Ten is better than 50 (ppb)," Knobloch said, referring to the EPA standard. "It's not high enough that you would see short-term health problems, but if you drink it over 10, 20, 30 years, you are going to have increased health risks."

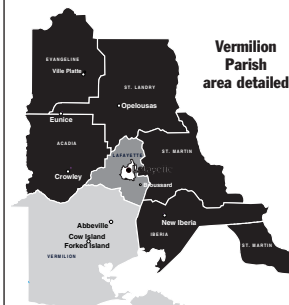
Knobloch's study indicates long-term ingestion of water that contains more than 5 ppb arsenic "significantly increases the risk of skin cancer. A history of cigarette use also was associated with higher skin cancer rates and was additive to the carcinogenic effect of arsenic."

State Sen. Nick Gautreaux, D-Meaux, said he's worried about the people who have arsenic levels as high as 50 ppb — five times higher than what the EPA recommends.

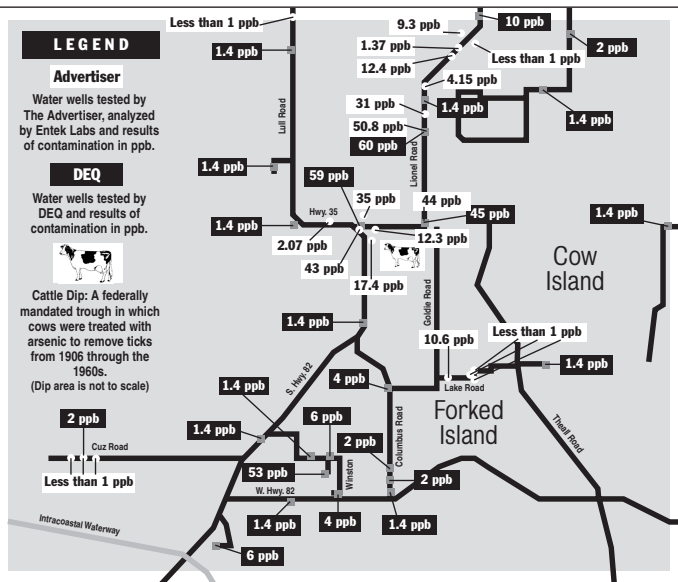
"If someone gave you five times the pain medication, or five times the amount of sleeping pills you're supposed to take, would you wake up in the morning?" Gautreaux said. "I am concerned about it. There's something that everybody has in common in our area — we all drink water."

Arsenic levels

The graphic at right depicts the Cow Island and Forked Island areas surveyed and tested for arsenic levels in drinking water by both *The Advertiser* at Entek Laboratories and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Locations marked are specific locations tested. In 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency changed its standards of acceptable arsenic levels from 50 parts per billion (ppb) to 10 ppb. The EPA's standards are only for public systems; however, the standards represent the level of arsenic considered to be safe.



Vermilion Parish area detailed



SOURCE: Mapped area based on Louisiana Civil Engineering map of water system improvements, Water Works District No. 1, Vermilion Parish, Louisiana and LDEQ GPS Wells Sampled

Bill Ramsey/wramsey@theadvertiser.com

About this section

The reporting team:

Reporters Kayla Gagnet and Jan Risher, along with photographer Claudia B. Laws, spent four months interviewing residents of Cow Island and Forked Island. They talked to experts on arsenic and public officials on all levels, spent weeks connecting with local residents, examined environmental documents and conducted testing of 21 private water wells in Cow Island.

Their report, "Poisoned Water: God's Country Contaminated," is an in-depth look at how this tiny rural community has banded together to solve the mystery of why so many of them are sick or dying.

How we tested the water:

Reporters Kayla Gagnet and Jan Risher obtained approved sampling containers from Baton Rouge's Entek Laboratories, which is certified to test for arsenic in drinking water by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals. The reporters knocked on doors and asked for permission to take samples. When residents agreed, reporters first purged the casing of the well by letting water run for 10 minutes. Then, water from the tap or from the well head was put into the containers, which contained the preservative nitric acid. The sealed containers were then labeled with the date the sample was

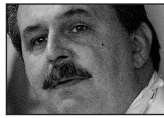
taken and assigned a number that corresponded with the residential information that was kept with reporters' notes. The samples — sent in three waves — were mailed via the U.S. postal service to Entek. Results were then returned from the lab directly to *The Daily Advertiser*.

On the cover:

The St. Anne's Cemetery is nestled behind St. Anne's Church in Cow Island. The area's water has tested high in arsenic, which residents think could be contributing to the high number of cancer cases in the area. Photo by Claudia B. Laws.

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"I want to just understand."

— Father Bill Rogalla, the priest who first discovered arsenic in his water in July after being diagnosed with a second type of cancer

Arsenic and old land

Highest
arsenic levels
found in
one-mile circle
in Cow Island

Kayla Gagnet

Unsafe levels of arsenic discovered in a tight one-mile radius in Cow Island have been confirmed now by two rounds of testing — one by *The Daily Advertiser* and another by the state. These results — along with an extensive, but informal door-to-door survey by residents themselves — add to the evidence being used to urge state intervention into what is a growing concern about life and death in Cow Island.

Residents are suspicious of the well water they drink, cook with and bathe in; suspicious of the cancer that is killing off neighbors at an alarming rate; suspicious of state officials who have offered few answers to persistent questions; suspicious of nearly every industry that could threaten their environment — from oil drilling companies to pesticide manufacturers. Experts on the subject say residents have reason to be worried.

"If they're concerned about arsenic in groundwater, the best thing to do is put them on a safe drinking water system to alleviate the problem," said local hydrogeologist Bruce K. Darling.

What started as a hunch from the local priest has turned the eyes of state agencies onto this rural, marshy Vermilion Parish community of about 1,500. Tests of area water wells show unhealthy levels of arsenic, an element proven to cause cancer. *The Daily Advertiser* and the state Department of Environmental Quality conducted tests of 21 and 25 wells, respectively. *The Advertiser* tests found nine wells, and DEQ found four to have levels of arsenic higher than what the federal government says is safe. The state and newspaper tests overlapped in three instances where high levels of arsenic were discovered.

Of those 10 unsafe wells, nine of them are within about a one-mile radius of St. Anne's Church. No one knows the cause of the high levels of arsenic but at least one old cattle dipping vat — used by farmers to kill ticks on cows — is located within the hot spot. Lawyers behind a recent lawsuit say they have evidence of even more contaminants in the area's water.

"I want to just understand," said Father Bill Rogalla, the priest who first discovered arsenic in his water in July after being diagnosed with a second type of cancer. "There are some things we may never know. And me, I should know that. We are so empirical in our thinking, but this is God's world, and some things can't be definitive."



Korban Abshire, 4, of Forked Island plays in water gathered in a drainage ditch near his home. Abshire and his family live on Cuz Road, but on a portion where public water is not yet available.

Claudia B. Laws

A contaminated place

Results of the duplicate water tests are similar. Tests by the DEQ and *The Daily Advertiser* confirm levels of arsenic above the standard that the federal government says is safe.

The newspaper paid about \$600 for tests at Entek Laboratories of Baton Rouge, one of the Department of Health and Hospital's certified labs for testing for arsenic in drinking water, in order to gather more reliable data on contamination. Two reporters gathered the samples over a series of weeks in the late fall.

Some of the highest levels found by *The Daily Advertiser* tests were at this community's hubs — Five Oaks Grocery and the St. Anne's Church Rectory. Testing showed contamination at 43 parts per billion (ppb) at the grocery and 50.8 ppb at the church rectory. Three homes

tested at 44 ppb, 35 ppb and 31 ppb. However, several results fell below 10 ppb and some even less than 1 ppb.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates arsenic levels in public water systems, has a standard of no more than 10 ppb for public systems, but it doesn't regulate private water wells, officials say.

Residents of Cow Island and its southern neighbor, Forked Island, began seriously questioning the safety of their water four months ago. Both are rural communities in southern Vermilion Parish. Even for the natives, it is difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. But there is a distinct difference when it comes to water: Parish water lines were made available to most residents of Forked Island in early October. There are preliminary, but no immediate, plans to provide parish water lines to residents of Cow Island.

A startling sickness

Residents in Cow Island and Forked Island spent weeks this fall going door to door to ask their neighbors about cancer. Information from those surveys was not complete enough to make comparisons to similar state and parish data. But in general, the surveys showed:

■ In these communities with a combined population of 1,500, at least 105 people are living with cancer.

■ The number of new cases per year appears to be accelerating. From 1995 to 1999, the area averaged nine new cases a year. But in the last five years, that average jumped to 15 new cases a year.

■ All different forms of cancer are listed on the survey, from breast cancer to skin cancer to prostate cancer, and many others.

Studies have shown chronic exposure to arsenic at levels as low as 5 ppb to 20 ppb causes increased risk for skin cancer and other health problems. As the exposure levels increase, so do the risks for lung, bladder and prostate cancers.

Although no one questions the link between arsenic and cancer, proving a connection between the area's cancer rate and its contaminated groundwater is difficult at best, health officials say. Nonetheless, the association is enough to anger and frighten this community; they are demanding the parish run public water to their homes.

This isn't the first time residents in this parish have suspected well water contamination. At Indian Bayou, about 15 miles north of Cow Island, residents are cherishing the public water they hooked into in recent months. In 2002, members of this also small unincorporated community banded together to demand the water because they were worried a nearby injection well had contaminated their groundwater.

Velma Stutes, one of the residents at the center of the Indian Bayou movement, said similar to Cow Island, people went door-to-door surveying their neighbors about cancer. But unlike here, where water well testing has shown unsafe levels of arsenic, Indian Bayou residents were unable to prove actual contamination. Little became of the cancer surveys and no cancer cluster could be proven, but Stutes and others said the end justified the means.

It took two years, but residents eventually convinced the government that they were at risk and qualified for "emergency" funding to pay for parish water lines. Parish water lines were completed this fall.

"We decided that we had to do something about it because we were all scared to drink the water," Stutes said.

In the tiny community of Coteau in Iberia Parish, residents occasionally still bring up a suspected "cancer cluster" from 1996. Four children living within a one-mile radius developed leukemia during a span of 10 years, a statistic that might not alarm city residents but certainly startled people enough to request the state study the area.

See ARSENIC on Page 4

Cow Island, Louisiana

Cow Island is not really an island. Neither is Forked Island. Or Dog Island. Or even Sassafra Island.

According to Arville Touchet, a soil scientist and mapping expert, the areas were named long ago by Pierre la Pointe de Vermilion, one of the first cattlemen to settle the area west of Bayou Vermilion. Touchet said "island" was one of several nautical terms — including Point and Cove — used to name distinct landscape areas in South Louisiana.

"It's a poetic justice. Most of the Cajuns were mariners at heart, sea faring fisherman," Touchet said. "They called them islands because they were islands of trees in a sea of prairie."

Cow Island was originally called *Ile des Vaches*. Local old-timers still sometimes refer to it and other areas, including *Ile Marrone* and *Ile Piniere*, by their French names. There are at least 25 so-called "islands" in the vicinity.

— Jan Risher



Claudia B. Laws

Continued from Page 3

Arsenic

"All the data is still in the review stage," says Bob Johannessen, spokesman for the state's DHH. He says scientists from his agency still are investigating the possible cluster. Johannessen said it has taken years to find controls — children born on the same day and year as the sick children but who did not contract leukemia.

A hesitant government

So far, officials have been slow to offer answers or draw conclusions for residents of Cow Island and Forked Island. At an August meeting with the community, DEQ officials all but dismissed initial tests residents conducted in private labs. They said the results couldn't be trusted because the tests were not conducted at a state-approved certified lab.

At DHH, another state agency involved, officials have begun using data from the Louisiana Tumor Registry to determine a specific cancer rate for the Cow Island area. Johannessen said that project won't be complete until some time next year.

State epidemiologist Dr. Raoult Ratard said true "cancer clusters" — a higher number of a certain type of cancer in a specific area caused by environmental factors — are rare.

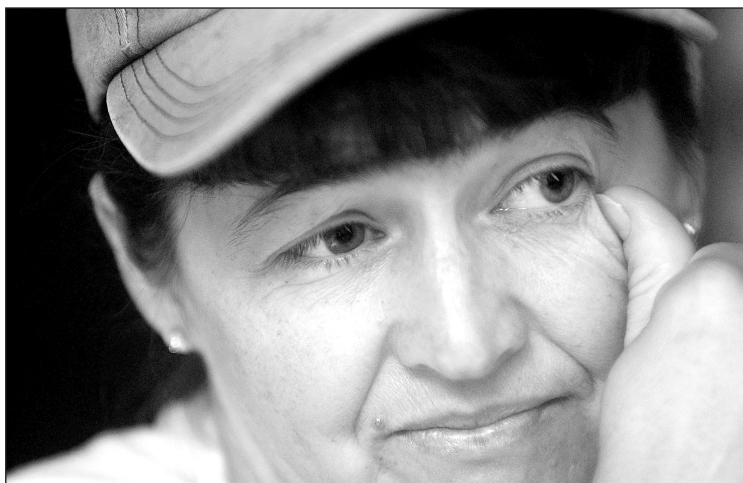
"From experience, most of the clusters that are being reported are just coincidences where people started paying attention," Ratard said.

Venesa Perry is paying attention. The Forked Island resident lost her 51-year-old mother in July to lung cancer. Her mother, Gloria Abshire, had never smoked, and doctors were baffled at how quickly the cancer destroyed Abshire's body.

The 35-year-old Perry recalled talking to her mother's oncologist shortly before she died. Perry showed the doctor a recent church bulletin where the priest, Father Rogalla, wrote about testing his water and learning he had high levels of arsenic.

"When she (the doctor) read that, she looked at me and said 'move.' I said, 'Where do you want me to pick up and move to? All my roots are here,'" Perry said.

Moving isn't an option for most oth-



Claudia B. Laws

Venesa Perry of Forked Island talks about the pain of losing her mother, Gloria Abshire, to cancer in July. Perry has crusaded for awareness of the arsenic in the water and cancer rates in the area. Perry's grandparents, who also live in Forked Island, both have cancer.

er residents either, but they hope to find solutions — whether it's cleaning up possible contamination or switching to the public water system.

"It's up to us to protect the future of the children of this community," said Cow Island resident Glenda Langlins. "That's why you vote. You hope that the ones you put in there will help you."

State Sen. Nick Gautreaux, D-Meaux, is trying to help. He and state Rep. Mickey Frith, D-Abbeville, coordinated the initial meeting with state officials. Gautreaux said although there's a tendency in the area to mistrust the government, he's impressed with the state involvement so far.

"The solution always comes in being aware of the problem," Gautreaux said. "If the community didn't come out the way they did, we would have never known there was a problem."

(Reporter Jan Risher contributed to this story.)



Claudia B. Laws

Beverly LeMaire of Kaplan tries on a pair of waders at Five Oaks Grocery prior to crawfishing in the area. Five Oaks Grocery, a gas station and convenience store in Cow Island that sells a little bit of everything, has experienced skyrocketing water bills since the store switched to using bottled water to prepare everything from coffee to the boudin made at the store.

Parts Per Million/Billion Perspective

On Jan. 22, 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency adopted a new standard for acceptable arsenic level in public water systems. The Safe Drinking Water Act revised the existing 50 parts per billion standard for arsenic in drinking water to 10 ppb, but it is not effective until Jan. 23, 2006.

EPA's proposed regulation addresses the long-term, chronic effects of exposure to inorganic arsenic in drinking water.

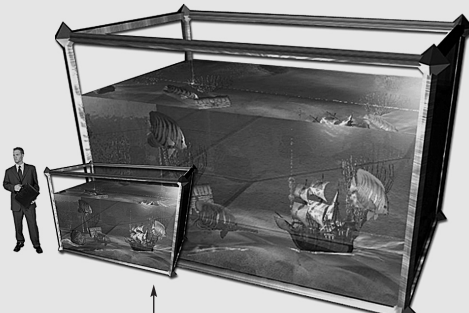
The EPA confirmed that chronic effects at low

concentrations of arsenic include at least four types of cancer: skin, bladder, lung and prostate.

Non-cancerous effects include skin pigmentation and keratosis (callus-like skin growths seen earliest and most often), gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, hormonal (e.g. diabetes), hematological (e.g., anemia), pulmonary, neurological, immunological, reproductive/developmental functions.

—Jan Risher

SOURCE: www.epa.gov/safewater



Parts Per Million

■ Imagine the figure above is 6 feet tall standing next to a tank 7 feet long, 5 feet wide and 5 feet deep. If he were to drop a teaspoon of sugar into the tank, this would be the rough equivalent of a part per million.

Parts Per Billion

■ Enlarge the figure and the tank 10 times its original size — a tank 70 feet long, 50 feet wide and 50 feet in depth. One teaspoon in this giant tank would represent one part per billion.

SOURCE: Roger A. Waggoner/UL Math Dept.

Bill Ramsey/w Ramsey@theadvertiser.com



Claudia B. Laws

Chris Greene of Kaplan watches as Cow Island's David Hebert, reflected in mirror, prepares to haul bales of hay to his cattle.

Ashley Couvillon, Cow Island

Unlike many other 21-year-olds, Ashley Couvillon loves her life in the country and that "there's nothing going on in Cow Island."

Until now.

Her 18-year-old sister Andrea agrees.

"It's very shocking and kind of disturbing to find out your water is contaminated and you've been drinking it for all those years," Andrea said.

The sisters both said they feel somewhat protective of the place their family has called home for generations.

"Now people know about Cow Island, but I don't like people knowing about it because of the water situation," Andrea said.

"I love Cow Island. I loved growing up in Cow Island. I love saying I'm from Cow Island. I love being from the country," Ashley said.

Andrea said that she recently was talking with fellow University of Louisiana students about the price of gas and was struck by the difference living "in the country" made in their lives. "It was like, 'we've got a gas tank in our yard. It's a different way of life than in the city,'" Andrea said.

Both sisters said they have taken the water situation very seriously.

"I don't even let my dog drink the water now," Ashley said.

— Jan Risher



Claudia B. Laws

“There’s no such thing as cost-effective when it comes to somebody’s life.”

— Father Bill Rogalla



Claudia B. Laws

Father Bill Rogalla of Cow Island gives his homily during Thanksgiving Mass at St. Anne's Church in Cow Island. Rogalla is undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma.

Faithful fight for justice

Kayla Gagnet

On a chilly Thanksgiving morning, he was eager to give thanks. Nevermind the bladder cancer and lymphoma, each poisoning his body. Or the ill effects of his chemotherapy, making it almost impossible to stand for more than an hour at a time. Or the arsenic in his well water that he fears poisoned him for years.

At a Thanksgiving Mass, the first in weeks to be held in the newly renovated St. Anne's Church, Father Bill Rogalla smiled at his parishioners.

"The cancers I have, it's very possible I wouldn't be here today," he said during his homily. "But God saw fit that I would be here. We need to be thankful for every day God gives us."

In the unincorporated communities known as "the Islands" — including Cow Island, Forked Island and Pecan Island — Rogalla is a leader. People here rely on their community priest, and that's a role he takes seriously. After all, it's what prompted him to sound the alarm this summer about possible water contamination.

"Really, he's just implementing one of the fundamental teachings of Catholic social teaching — care for God's creation," said Una Hargrave, director of the Diocese of Lafayette Department of Justice and Peace. "We have to take care of the environment."

This summer, Rogalla was diagnosed with lymphoma, just a year after being diagnosed with bladder cancer. Both diseases are rare, but it was the lymphoma that prompted him to start asking questions. A resident of Cow Island for just six years, Rogalla soon learned that the priest who preceded him, Father Lloyd Bordelon, also died of lymphoma in 2000, shortly after leaving his post at St. Anne's. In July, Rogalla tested for all sorts of contaminants in his water supply. Only arsenic levels came back high.

"The first thing you think about is the water," Rogalla said in August after helping to organize a

meeting with about 200 residents and a slew of state officials.

A transplant, Rogalla originally is from St. Paul, Minn., and was raised in Wisconsin. He came to South Louisiana in 1985, starting at a church in New Iberia. He jokes that whenever he misses home, he watches the film "Fargo" — Rogalla retains a touch of the accent for which the film is notorious.

"It's good that he's an outsider," said Bennie Mouton, Rogalla's secretary. "He can see things that we don't notice."

Despite being an outsider, Rogalla has a firm grasp on what's important to his community. He frequently refers to "our culture" of rice farming, crawfishing and good food. He's even taken on Cajun terms of endearment, such as "cher" and "boo."

Pointing the finger of blame has been far from Rogalla's concern; he's long said that he simply wants to get clean water to the people.

Rogalla's passion for the community and its people have put him in the center of what has become a pervasive community issue. He has been the point of contact for state agencies, outsiders looking to help and residents concerned about their health.

"We're just very grateful that someone finally did look into (the cancer cases)," said parishioner Claudette Broussard, who used to work for Rogalla. "There's years that we've been questioning, but no one ever took it upon themselves to do it."

And for months Rogalla has used the pulpit — along with the weekly church bulletin — as a conduit for passing on the latest information about water. He makes the rounds each Sunday through "the Islands," doing a 7:30 a.m. mass in Cow Island, a 9 a.m. mass in Forked Island and a 6 p.m. mass in Pecan Island.

Rogalla said money should be no object in getting clean, safe drinking water to the people.

"There's no such thing as cost-effective when it comes to somebody's life," Rogalla said. "In our area, we're so rural and pushed aside ... This is what the church has always done — social justice."

He has frequent visitors to the rectory; they ask about his health, the water, their own health. In his quaint white house with more than 20 cats, even these stray animals deserve an advocate.

A new cancer case becomes a weight on his heart.

"We had two more ladies get brain cancer after we finished the cancer surveys," Rogalla said in November. He shook his head at the injustice.

Pointing the finger of blame has been far from Rogalla's concern; he's long said that he simply wants to get clean water to the people.

"We may never be able to clean it all up," Rogalla said of the contamination. "It's just gonna have to be time and God."

Amid trying to be a voice for his parishioners, Rogalla has had to step back and take care of his own health. He has been undergoing painful chemotherapy that he finished in early December. His doctors aren't sure how the chemicals will affect his bladder cancer, most of which was removed during surgery more than a year ago. The chemo leaves his legs weak, so he can't perform Mass more than once on Sunday mornings.

"He gets tired easily," Broussard said sadly, "but he's still very active for what he's going through."

Rogalla will have to return to the doctor every six months for further drug therapy.

"It's a rest-of-your-life thing," Rogalla said. (Jan Risher contributed to this report.)



Claudia B. Laws

Greg Couvillion, Cow Island

A wooden sign on Greg and Mary Jo Couvillion's wall seems to say it all:

"There's no place like home ... Cow Island, LA." Their daughter had it made for them while they lived in Kansas. The couple returned to their roots just three years ago.

The discovery of unsafe levels of arsenic in some drinking water wells hasn't changed the Couvillions' feelings about their rural, marshy cattle farming community.

Greg Couvillion said he's skeptical of just how bad the contamination is and whether it has caused higher cancer rates in the area, but that doesn't mean he's not concerned.

"If there's something in the water, I think it should be

cleaned up," said Couvillion, 54. "But how bad it is, I don't know."

A retired oil company worker and now cattle farmer, Couvillion is fully connected to the debate — he's a cousin of Cow Island native and Sheriff Mike Couvillion, as well as Richard Broussard, the attorney who has filed a lawsuit about water contamination. And a great-grandfather supposedly owned one of the cattle dipping sites allegedly contaminating the water.

"Arsenic's one thing, but there's a lot of other things," Couvillion said, referring to other factors that could cause cancer.

"I'm not disputing it, but I think there's a lot of things involved."

— Kayla Gagnet



Claudia B. Laws

This is a former cattle dipping site in Cow Island that was used until the 1950s or '60s, according to residents.



Claudia B. Laws

Cow Island native Greg Couvillon climbs onto his tractor to finish feeding rice bran to his cattle in Forked Island. He doesn't use the cattle dips that many think poisoned the water, but he said he remembers when farmers used them in years past.

Poisoned by history, economy

Cattle pesticide washes used for decades may be source of arsenic, lawsuit claims

Kayla Gagnet
Jan Risher

The very thing that kept Cow Island alive in its past might be killing it today. Cows were an economic mainstay for many years. Cattle dips — giant pesticide washes — were dug into the ground; they were, for decades, a federally required part of raising cattle.

"Used to be, there were no fences. The cows would roam loose everywhere," said area resident Wilman Gaspard. "They would only tell whose cow it was by a ring in the nose or a clip on the left ear. Cow Island is where they kept the cows when they were calling."

Cows walked through large cattle dips — vats filled with a slurry of arsenic trioxide, a common inorganic arsenical pesticide. As the slurry lost its potency, it had to be changed several times a year. The used slurry was then often dumped on neighboring soil, further spreading arsenic.

A lawsuit — filed in November on behalf of a retired Cow Island couple — says cattle dips are to blame for arsenic contamination in private water wells in the area. The lawsuit seeks relief from the companies that produced the arsenic-laced concoction, Veliscol Chemical Corp. based in Illinois and Schering-Plough Corp. based in New Jersey.

Attorney Richard Broussard represents his brother-in-law Dale David and David's wife Del Dean. Although he's joined forces with a well-known environmental law firm out of Lake Charles, Broussard is as close to the problem as other natives.

"I grew up enjoying the well water, without having any clue that water was poisoned," Broussard said at a Novem-



Claudia B. Laws

Claudette Broussard, center, of Cow Island listens to lawyers who filed a suit against pesticide manufacturers on the behalf of the David family. The informational gathering was held at Forked Island / E. Broussard Elementary School in November.

ber community meeting.

Although Broussard has shied from the spotlight, particularly media attention, he held the meeting to let this close-knit community know the goal of the suit. It's a goal that benefits the entire community, he said, because it aims to set up a court-monitored fund into which the defendants would pay. The money would be used to clean up all contaminated areas, Broussard said.

Broussard's partner firm, Ranier, Gayle and Elliot of Lake Charles, was involved in writing the Louisiana Groundwater Statute. The statute allows a court-mandated cleanup of all contamination, separate from any damages awarded to the plaintiffs.

A lot of the time, small communities like this get left out," said attorney Frank Elliot.

Arsenic is a naturally occurring metal, but test results of many area wells indicate an inconsistent and sometimes unhealthy level of arsenic in well water. With Cow Island's coastal geology, it's reasonable to link the higher than expected levels of arsenic to other sources including the cattle dips of yesterday, says one authority on the subject.

"If the arsenic was natural it would be all over an aquifer. If it was caused by a cattle dip, it would be where it had gone in the last little while," said Richard Wilson, a professor of physics at Harvard and an expert on arsenic exposure and arsenic in groundwater.

Cow Island residents can identify at least three sites where the former cattle dips were located.

Wilson said that the issue of cattle

dips should be addressed immediately. He said that his first recommendation would be a municipal water system with sufficient filtering capabilities.

Although the attorneys have declined to give details, they say their own tests of water in the area confirm arsenic contamination. There's also heptachlor and heptachlor epoxide, both derivatives of the pesticide, Chlordane, Elliot said.

The heptachlor likely came from insecticides once used to kill fire ants.

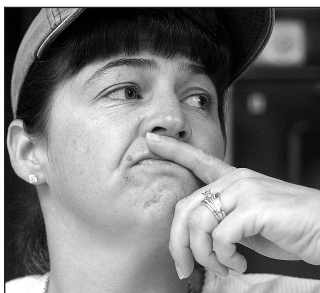
But Schering-Plough — the company that originally manufactured Cooper's Cattle Dip, the alleged source of arsenic — maintains it's not to blame for the contamination. The product was taken off the market in 1985 and the company was sold twice before being bought by Schering-Plough in 1997.

"We believe we don't really have any responsibility for the contamination," said Rosemarie Yancosek, a Schering-Plough spokeswoman.

The *Daily Advertiser* was unable to reach a spokesperson at Veliscol Chemical Corp.

Pesticides may not be the only source of arsenic contamination in the area, lawyers and residents say.

Elliot and Broussard said their environmental experts were looking into old oil well sites, but they declined to be specific. Many wells were dumping sites for years but have long been abandoned, and no one's sure if chemicals from those wells seeped into the groundwater. Residents also have been suspicious of a now-defunct natural gas plant, which a state Department of Environmental Quality spokesman says is undergoing remediation for hydrocarbons related to diesel gas and oil.



Claudia B. Laws

Venesa Perry, Forked Island

The nurses at the hospital where her mother lay dying dubbed her "the next Erin Brockovich." Venesa Perry, 35, laughs at the comparison to the now-famous single mother-turned environmentalist, but seems proud of it, too.

Perry has become an outspoken advocate in the search for why so many of her neighbors are dying of cancer. Perry lost her mother Gloria Abshire to lung cancer in July. Abshire had never smoked and had lived an otherwise healthy life.

When Perry learned that many of her neighbors also had unsafe levels of arsenic in their drinking water, she was quick to draw a correlation between the water and her mother's rapidly spreading form of cancer.

"They had both of them doctors puzzled," Perry said about her mother's cancer. "She (the oncologist) thinks it was a gene that went haywire. Really, I don't know."

Perry said it took weeks of repeated hospital visits, tests, X-rays and biopsies before doctors diagnosed

Abshire with cancer. Daughter rarely left mother's side during the four-month hospital stay that Perry called "a roller coaster ride."

"Her cancer was so aggressive, it was producing a protein that was causing blood clots," Perry said.

Abshire died July 23, six days before her 52nd birthday. Less than a month later, Perry and hundreds of her neighbors would face state officials at a public meeting about the water.

It was Perry's loss that prompted her to band together with about 25 other residents to do something. She and others spent weeks going door-to-door asking their neighbors about cancer. She filled out surveys about who was diagnosed with what and when.

Although she hadn't yet analyzed the numbers, Perry admitted the anecdotal results were haunting.

"It's not only affecting a certain age group; it's affecting all age groups," Perry said.

— Kayla Gagnet

Money, politics clog water lines

Cow Island residents wonder when they'll see public water

Kayla Gagnet

For some residents of Cow Island, clean drinking water is so close they can taste it; but it isn't likely to be running from their taps anytime soon.

Money, landscape and Vermilion Parish politics are likely to make running water lines a complicated and lengthy process, even though Forked Island residents — some within a stone's throw of their Cow Island neighbors — have public water today. It's not because they said they needed it for health reasons.

It's because the project was deemed "economically feasible" by Waterworks District 1, long before news broke of water contamination.

"Everybody seems to go there first," Police Juror Carroll Duhon said about the community linking its drinking water to illness. "And that's probably a good thing to do."

The now parish-wide district based in Maurice serves everything west of the Vermilion River, mostly rural areas that aren't already served by a water district. There are about 3,000 households connected, with another 600 hooked up by the end of the year.

Pierre Simon, of Forked Island, paid \$80 recently to lay the pipes to hook his home to the regional water system.

"They put a meter at the road and you've got to connect it to your house at your expense. It only cost around \$80 to connect it to my house," Simon said.

Even with water from the regional system, Simon said he continues to use bottled water for cooking, drinking and making coffee.

Duhon, who heads the water district, said it started seven years ago with areas west and south of Maurice and then spread to Indian Bayou and Nunez. Work in Indian Bayou was expedited because of water contamination that residents suspected there in 2001; the area received emergency grants to run public water.

Duhon said district engineers look for possible projects, develop plans and then apply for government grants and loans.



Eve Gaspard adds tap water to chicken while making lunch for her husband and her grandson at their Cow Island home. Although the Gaspards try to use filtered or bottle water, sometimes they use tap water for its convenience.

Claudia B. Laws

"We're looking at what's feasible and the most people we can serve feasibly," Duhon said.

The water district gets no tax dollars. It is self-sustaining, paid by users who are connected to the water lines. Money to expand the district comes from loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and grants from the state Office of Rural Development.

But residents in Cow Island have questioned parish officials about why their neighbors in the nearby Forked Island recently were hooked up to the parish water. Cow Island isn't slated for the public water yet, but since news of possible arsenic contamination broke in August, parish engineers have started studying how much it would cost to put the area on the system.

"We don't have a number on the cost of the project at this point," said Liz Girouard with the district's engineering firm Sellers and Associates. It would encompass a much larger area

than the Forked Island project, spanning all the way north to Kaplan.

The Forked Island project took longer than expected, said Waterworks District 1 systems manager Jeffery Soulier, because initial bids from contractors came back over budget.

"It takes a lot more money to run lines in rural marshland," Soulier said.

And unexpected expenses can pop up — like the nearly \$15,000 more it would have cost to run water lines under the bridge in Forked Island's Cuz Road.

Still, the district ended up with \$300,000 left over from that project that it will use to bring water to even more homes.

"We're going to do some extensions on some roads we didn't get to serve," Girouard said.

Duhon and Soulier said that some areas didn't get public water because too few people signed up showing interest, but that was before they knew their well water was contaminated, residents said.

Now, they're hoping public attention to the problem will put pressure on public officials to bring the parish's clean water to those who don't have it.

That's the only way Indian Bayou was able to get their water, said resident Harold Breaux. Breaux was one of many in the community who took an active role in seeking public water two years ago.

"If the people in Cow Island don't stay after it, it'll just get swept under the rug and that'll be the end of it," Breaux said.

(Jan Risher contributed to this report.)

Alternatives, waiting can cost residents

Kayla Gagnet
Jan Risher

Getting public water may be costly, but waiting for it is expensive, too.

Many in Cow Island stopped using their well water when they learned it was likely contaminated with arsenic. Some have simply stopped drinking it; others have stopped cooking with it, too. But alternatives, such as filtration systems and bottled water, are getting expensive for some families.

Brian Hollier is the owner of the community's only grocery — Five Oaks. As soon as he heard about water contamination, he yanked his store's fountain soda machine. It used well water to mix with the syrup, and according to Hollier's stepmother Beverly Hollier, the sodas were a "big seller."

Now the store spends as much as \$300 a month for Kentwood water to use for cooking in the store. Most of it goes to the coffee pot (cups are free for everyone). They go through about three or four large pots a day, Beverly Hollier said.

And Brian Hollier uses bottled water in his home, which is attached to the store.

"You take it for granted until you can't even brush your teeth; you've got to come into the kitchen just to get a glass of Kentwood water," Hollier said.

Father Bill Rogalla noticed the irony of trying to save on water — one of the first things he did when became priest at St. Anne's six years ago was get rid of all the bottled water in an effort to save money. He had no clue then that his water was contaminated, and now he's back to the buying water routine.

Charissa Harrington, of Forked Island, continues buying bottled water even though her home was recently hooked up to the regional water lines.

"I'm a Sam's member. I buy my water there. I buy 32 bottles for \$4.88. I spend about \$15 a week on bottled water," Harrington said.

Companies selling filtration systems have seized on news reports about arsenic contamination, using it as a way to hawk their product. Residents say salespeople have gone door-to-door in recent months; some people have bought the systems, but many elected to stick with bottled water.

For those who are hooked up to the public system, clean water is still is not unlimited. It costs a minimum of \$13 a month, and goes up depending on how much they use. Many have elected to continue using their wells along with the public water in order to save money. Some farmers who rely on the water for their rice fields and crawfish ponds say they just can't get around using the free and plentiful well water, even if they know it's contaminated.

At least one person in Cow Island has chosen not to let arsenic affect his life much one way or the other: Greg Couvillon says that he spends "basically zero" on bottled water.

"I'm not spending any money on extra water," Couvillon said.

The cost of water:

- \$5.5 million budgeted to build a new water plant in Esther and run lines to Pecan Island, Forked Island and Intracoastal City
- About \$300,000 left over from that project that can be used to bring water lines down some roads that project doesn't yet serve
- \$50 sign-up fee required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to indicate an interest in getting the water
- \$500 to get a meter put in front of your home

after the lines have been run if you don't pay the initial sign-up fee

- \$250-\$300 to pay professionals to run a water line from the meter at the road up to your house
- \$60-\$80 to buy the parts and run the line yourself
- \$13 per month is the minimum for using the water, and that pays for 2,000 gallons
- \$2.65 per 1,000 gallons over the initial 2,000

SOURCE: Vermilion Parish Waterworks District 1



Claudia B. Laws

Mary Trahan, Cow Island

Mary Trahan's brother-in-law Harry Logan drives to her house every day from Abbeville, bringing with him jugs of water.

"I'm 89, and the man that brings it is 86," Trahan said almost proudly. She turns 90 years old Monday.

Buying water is too expensive for these retirees, so Logan fills empty jugs with water from his house in Abbeville; he reasons it must be better than what Trahan is drinking.

Trahan has lived in Cow Island her entire life and has stayed relatively healthy, too. A Daily Advertiser test of her water showed 10.6 ppb of arsenic, just a hair above what the Environmental Protection Agency allows for public water systems.

She's not so concerned for herself but said she hopes that family and friends who live along Lake Road with her can get clean water.

— Kayla Gagnet

The state agencies remain cautious. They can afford to be. The residents of Cow Island cannot. They need help. Now. They need a new water supply now.

— Juli Metzger, Executive Editor, The Daily Advertiser



Claudia B. Laws

Father Bill Rogalla of Cow Island returns to an empty St. Anne's Church after Thanksgiving services. Rogalla just completed his chemotherapy for lymphoma, but the treatments often leave him weak and struggling to say Mass.

Not a drop of time to waste

Juli Metzger

Executive Editor



There are few things that are more basic to our happiness and well-being than water. But most of us take it all for granted. Go to the faucet, turn it on and drink up. Right?

Not so fast. The communities of Cow Island and Forked Island have good reason to be suspect of their water. Knock on a door in this tiny, marshy community and you're likely to find someone in the home who either is living with cancer or who has a family member who has lost the battle.

They know this because that's what they did: The residents themselves, in search of answers, knocked on doors, took names and collected data. They suspected something environmental was causing the cancer, but no one would listen. When their parish priest — Father Bill Rogalla — got news of his second kind of cancer, he wrapped his robe of faith around this community and sounded the alarm.

On a hunch, he paid \$500 to have his own water — from St. Anne's Rectory — tested in July and found that only the arsenic readings came back at unsafe levels. He then told his parishioners. He and this community are determined to find another water source. Time is short for Fr. Bill and others. Cancer is eating away at them. But even so, Fr. Bill isn't looking for anyone to blame. He just wants

help for his community.

Meanwhile, state agencies remain cautious.

They can afford to be.

The residents of Cow Island cannot. They need help. Now. They need a new water supply now.

This is going to be expensive and most in Cow Island and Forked Island are of modest means. But a safe water supply is life and death for these families. They'll figure out how, if the state can meet them half way. That means putting in the infrastructure that would provide parish water; water that is filtered.

There isn't time to go through a lot of finger pointing. We need to agree that something must be done.

There isn't time to wait on lawyers and lawsuits.

There isn't time to test the private wells of all 1,500 residents of this tight-knit community.

It is ironic that water would be at the heart of a such a mystery in south Louisiana. After all, water is what makes where we live the place it is. A significant portion of our population depends on groundwater from individual wells. It is from the water that we have hatched such industries as crawfishing and shrimping, oil drilling in the Gulf is a major influence on our economy.

And, of course, there is agriculture that helps sustain us.

But along with those industries come responsibilities for maintaining the land. It is clear that there has, at the very least, been a breakdown at this level. There is little doubt about the contamination of well water in Cow Island and Forked Island. One result is high levels of arsenic in private wells. For now, it is affecting the lives and livelihoods of a small population. But make no mistake, this may very well be only the beginning.

It is a mystery why so many people on Cow Island and Forked Island have cancer. It is a mystery this report does not solve, nor did we expect to.

But there are clues: high arsenic readings within a tight one-mile radius in Cow Island should add to the evidence. Results from testing for arsenic in well water by *The Daily Advertiser* and the state Department of Environmental Quality should be considered. Areas that are found to be contaminated should be cleaned up.

■ The highest level found in both the DEQ's and *The Advertiser's* testing was at St. Anne's Church Rectory. DEQ's test at St. Anne's showed 60 parts per billion (ppb) and *The Daily Advertiser's* showed 50.3 ppb. This summer, Fr. Bill was diagnosed with lymphoma, just a year after being diagnosed with bladder cancer. The St. Anne's priest before him died of lymphoma in 2000.

■ Five Oaks Grocery Store — the only grocer in town — also showed high results in both tests; DEQ's results tested at 59 ppb and *The Advertiser* tested at 43 ppb. The store removed its fountain Coke machine — a popular item and customer draw — because it required water to operate.

The people of Cow Island and Forked Island no longer take water for granted. Neither should we. The state needs to act and clear whatever red tape there is. The solution that typically comes to mind first is for the state or parish to run a public water system to area residents.

For residents who chose not to wait on the state can take matters more into their own hands with at least two other processes: buying their own filtration system or harvesting rainwater. There is one overriding lesson we must take from this report: Cherish the land and respect your environment. That can be done starting today.

Solutions

■ Expand the regional public water system

Building a regional water system that would serve all the residents in the Cow Island vicinity using private water wells will be costly. It will also take time. According to public officials, the best case scenario for a new system to be up and running would take at least two years.

A regional water system out of Esther was recently made available to many residents in the Forked Island area.

■ Install your own filtering system

The Environmental Protection Agency recommends one of three types of filtering systems to remove arsenic: reverse osmosis, activated alumina and ion exchange treatment. Filters can be point-of-entry (whole house) devices or point-of-use (single tap) devices. (See http://epa.gov/ogwdw/ars/treatments_and_costs.pdf)

Bob Johannessen, spokesman for the state Department of Health and Hospitals, urges people to follow manufacturer's instructions when using water filters.

"You can't just install it and assume it's going to work forever and ever," Johannessen said. "They require a certain amount of maintenance and upkeep."

■ Harvest rain water for your supply

Rather than going to the ground for water, residents could look to the sky. Tony Adrian has installed a system to harvest rainwater for his home near Opelousas. Adrian said that Cow Island residents "may want to consider immediately switching from contaminated well water to a free source of pure water — rainwater." Adrian said that a four-inch rain provides his home with enough water for four months. "We have no concerns about arsenic, pesticides, rust, or any other contaminants. We'd never go back to well or 'city' water," Adrian said.

— Jan Risher