

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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“Public Notice to Water Users”

Dennis Watts, City of Norfolk Water and Sewer Director, was on vacation when the City received a letter from Nebraska State Health and Human Services (HSS) that coliform bacteria had been detected in Norfolk’s water. Watts wasn’t concerned with the integrity of the water distribution system. His first concern is that citizens in Norfolk aren’t worried about the quality of their drinking water and further testing showed no coliform in these samples. Water customers do not need to boil their water or take other corrective actions.

“Coliform can be everywhere. It’s on your hands, on your phone, on your kitchen table. When the HSS sees coliform in a sample, they are concerned there might be a leak in a pipe or other infiltration into the water system,” Watts said.

He explained that coliform is an indicator organism. Any time coliform is detected in a sample, the sample is tested for other bacteria of greater concern, such as fecal coliform or E.coli. No fecal coliform or E.coli were detected in any of Norfolk’s water samples.



A City Water Division staff member takes 25 samples of water from areas all around Norfolk each month. There are 80 different collection sites including businesses, homes and schools used on a rotating basis. Once the required samples are collected they’re sent to an off site laboratory for testing. Two of the June samples showed the presence of coliform.

Once Watts’ staff found out about the coliform detection, they sampled the original sites where samples had been taken and took additional samples including two from sites downstream and two from sites upstream of where the original samples were taken. Water samples were also taken at both the West Water Treatment Plant and East Water Treatment Plant. No coliform was found in any of these samples.

“We’re pretty sure the samples that failed were caused by improper sampling techniques, contaminated sample bottles or a laboratory error. These tests are very sensitive. When a sample is taken, the lid can’t touch any surface and there can’t be any air movement or coliform molecules may get into the water,” Watts said.

The City puts chlorine in the water that kills any germs. The day that coliform were found in the samples, the water was also tested for chlorine. There were sufficient amounts of chlorine to rid the water of any bacteria, which also points to an error not associated with integrity of the water system.

The last time the HSS alerted City officials of coliform in two water samples was in August of 1994. At that time City staff took additional samples and found no coliform in the water then either. Watts emphasized that the City of Norfolk’s water is safe.

“The total water use in a typical single-family home is 101 gallons per person per day. People can drink water from any public tap in Norfolk with a high assurance of safety. Our sophisticated water treatment process, frequent testing and a vast underground infrastructure continues to provide citizens with safe plentiful water right to your tap,” Watts said.

The Environmental Protection Agency and HHS require that the City Water Division mail notices to all the water users letting them know coliform were detected. The notices will be mailed this week. For more information contact the City of Norfolk Water Division at 402-844-2210.