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10 American Cities With the Worst Drinking Water

By [DOUGLAS MCINTYRE](#) Posted 10:00 AM 01/31/11 [Columns](#), [Health Care](#)
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Unknown to most Americans, a surprising number of U.S. cities have drinking water with unhealthy levels of chemicals and contaminants. In fact, some organizations and state environmental agencies that collect and analyze water data say the level of chemicals in some Americans' drinking water not only exceeds recommended health guideline but the pollutants even exceed the limits set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the national legal authority in these matters.



The website [24/7 Wall St.](#) examined the quality of water supplies in most major America cities, using data collected from multiple sources for five years (ending in 2009) by Environmental Working Group (EWG), based in Washington, D.C. The fact that the data covered a half-decade is important because it shows that the presence of certain chemicals is persistent.

Cities in Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia provided insufficient data to be included in EWG's database. Some other major cities outside of these states also failed to submit information, including Detroit, Salt Lake City and Washington, D.C.

Test results from EWG's national database covered "a total of 316 contaminants in water supplied to 256 million Americans in 48,000 communities in 45 states." According to the data, among the contaminants were 202 chemicals that aren't subject to any government regulation or safety standards for drinking water.

Based on the EWG's methodology, 24/7 Wall St. came up with its 10 worst cities list. These cities' water quality rank is based on three metrics, in order of increasing importance:

- The percentage of chemicals found based on the number that were tested for
- The total number of contaminants found
- The most dangerous average level of a single pollutant.

Here's that list, in descending order, with the city's water utility in parenthesis:

10. Jacksonville, Fla. (JEA)

Located on the northeast coast of Florida, Jacksonville is the state's largest city. According to EWG, 23 different toxic chemicals were found in Jacksonville's water supply. The chemicals most frequently discovered in high volumes were trihalomethanes, which consist of four different cleaning byproducts -- one of which is chloroform. Many trihalomethanes are believed to be carcinogenic. Over the five-year testing period, unsafe levels of trihalomethanes were detected during each of the 32 months of testing, and levels deemed illegal by the EPA were detected in 12

of those months. During at least one testing period, trihalomethane levels were measured at nearly twice the EPA legal limit. Chemicals like arsenic and lead were also detected at levels exceeding health guidelines.

9. San Diego (San Diego Water Department)

Located on the Pacific in Southern California, San Diego is the country's eighth-largest city. According to California's Department of Public Health, San Diego's drinking water system contained eight chemicals exceeding health guidelines as well as two chemicals that exceeded the EPA's legal limit. In total, 20 contaminants have been found. One of those in excess of the EPA limit was trihalomethanes. The other was manganese, a natural element that's a byproduct of industrial manufacturing and can be poisonous to humans.

8. North Las Vegas (City of North Las Vegas Utilities Department)

North Las Vegas's water supply mostly comes from groundwater and the Colorado River, and doesn't contain chemicals exceeding legal limits. However, the water supply did contain 11 chemicals that exceeded health guidelines set by federal and state health agencies. The national average for chemicals found in cities' water exceeding health guidelines is four. North Las Vegas had a total of 26 contaminants, compared with the national average of eight. The water contained an extremely high level of uranium, a radioactive element.

7. Omaha (Metropolitan Utilities District)

The land-locked city of Omaha gets its water from the Missouri and Platte Rivers, as well as from groundwater. Of the 148 chemicals tested for in Omaha, 42 were detected in some amount, 20 of which were above health guidelines, and four of those were detected in illegal amounts. These were atrazine, trihalomethanes, nitrate and nitrite, and manganese. Atrazine is an herbicide that has been shown to cause birth defects. Nitrate is found in fertilizer, and nitrite is used for curing meat. Manganese was detected at 40 times the legal limit during one month of testing.

6. Houston (City of Houston Public Works)

Houston is the fourth-largest U.S. city. It gets its water from sources such as the Trinity River, the San Jacinto Rivers and Lake Houston. Texas conducted 22,083 water quality tests between 2004 and 2007 on Houston's water supply, and found 18 chemicals that exceeded federal and state health guidelines, compared to the national average of four. Three chemicals exceeded EPA legal health standards, against the national average of 0.5 chemicals. A total of 46 pollutants were detected, compared to the national average of eight. The city water has contained illegal levels of alpha particles, a form of radiation. Similarly, haloacetic acids, from various disinfection byproducts, have been detected.

5. Reno (Truckee Meadows Water Authority)

Reno gets most of its water from the Truckee River, which flows from Lake Tahoe. Of the 126 chemicals tested for in Reno over four years, 21 were discovered in the city's water supply, eight of which were detected in levels above EPA health guidelines, and three of these occurred in illegal amounts. These were manganese, tetrachloroethylene and arsenic. Tetrachloroethylene is a fluid used for dry cleaning and as an industrial solvent, and is deemed a likely carcinogenic by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Arsenic is a byproduct of herbicides and pesticides, and is extremely poisonous to humans. During at least one month of testing, arsenic levels were detected at roughly two and a half times the legal limit.

4. Riverside County, Calif. (Eastern Municipal Water District)

Riverside county is a 7,200-square-mile area located north of San Diego, part of California's "Inland Empire." The county is primarily located in desert territory, and so the water utilities draw their supply from the Bay Delta, which is miles to the north. The water in Riverside County contained 13 chemicals that exceeded recommended health guidelines over the four tested years, and one that exceeded legal limits. In total, 22 chemicals were detected in the district's water supply. The contaminant exceeding legal health standards was tetrachloroethylene.

3. Las Vegas (Las Vegas Valley Water District)

Located in the Mojave desert, Las Vegas gets its water from the Colorado River through miles-long intake pipes. While its water doesn't exceed the legal limits for any single type of contaminant, Las Vegas's water has a large range of pollutants. Of the 125 chemicals tested for over a five-year period, 30 were identified in some amount, and 12 were found in levels that exceeded EPA health guidelines. These chemicals included radium-226, radium-228, arsenic and lead. The two radium isotopes are commonly found around uranium deposits and are hazardous to human health, even in small quantities.

2. Riverside, Calif. (City of Riverside Public Utilities)

Riverside, with a population slightly greater than 300,000, gets most of its drinking supply from groundwater. Regulators in the city of Riverside, which has a different water-treatment facility than the rest of Riverside County, detected 15 chemicals that exceeded health guidelines and one that exceeded legal standards. In total, 30 chemicals were found. Since 2004, the water has almost consistently been riddled with alpha particle activity, traces of bromoform (a form of trihalomethane) and uranium, causing an unusually unhealthy water supply.

1. Pensacola, Fla. (Emerald Coast Water Utility)

Located on the Florida Panhandle along the Gulf of Mexico, Pensacola is Florida's westernmost major city. Analysts say it has the worst water quality in the country. Of the 101 chemicals tested for over five years, 45 were discovered. Of them, 21 were discovered in unhealthy amounts. The worst of these were radium-228 and -228, trichloroethylene, tetrachloroethylene, alpha particles, benzene and lead. Pensacola's water was also found to contain cyanide and chloroform. The combination of these chemicals makes Pensacola's water supply America's most unhealthy.

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Douglas A. McIntyre is the former editor-in-chief and publisher of *Financial World Magazine*. He was also president of Switchboard.com, which, at the time, was the 10th most visited website in the world. He was CEO of On2 Technologies, which proved the video compression for the nearly 800 million Flash players on PCs around the world. McIntyre has appeared on CNBC, Fox Business, CNN, and BBC News.

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wdarrin1st 7:57 PM Feb 1, 2011

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This article is absolutely untrue and a bold-faced lie. I would like to know from Mr. Douglas McIntyre what scientific methods EWG used to conducted their testing? Is there scientific documentation that Mr. Douglas McIntyre used when writing his article or did he just rely on special interest environmental group? Before the article was published, who verified the facts or were the facts even considered? I for one still believe in respectful journalism and fell for the lies contained in this article until I personally researched the facts. Why? Because I live in the great city of Pensacola and I'm personally offered. Our water Mr. Douglas McIntyre, meets or exceeds federal and state water quality standards. Factual scientific documentation can back up my claim, can yours? Mr. Douglas McIntyre, If you have any common respect for the truth or at least for your readers, publish a retraction based on the facts! Media parasites should be ashamed!

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rosal68 1:03 PM Feb 1, 2011

(1) (0)

WELL NO WONDER THEY KEEP TRYING TO LOOK IN OUTERSPACE FOR A PLANET WITH WATER... KIND OF A NO FIND THING SO FAR MAKES YOU WONDER WHO AT THESES SO CALLED WATER TREATMENT PLANTS WENT TO COLLEGE TO FIGURE OUT THAT CHLORINE IS THE ANSWER TO MAKING THE WATER SAFE TO DRINK FOR HUMANS NOW DOESN'T IT ? MAYBE IN 50 YEAR'S THE TRUTH WILL COME OUT ABOUT ALL THOSE SO CALLED SPECIAL FEED'S THAT WERE ADDED TO HELP PRODUCE BETTER MEAT'S AND VEGGIES WE ALL EAT ?

[Report Abuse](#)**almeder** 11:35 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(3\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

This is an important subject. What most people don't understand is that when the government says that your water is "safe", they are referring to the legal definition of the word "safe" (a definition that they created), and not the English language definition of the word "safe". So the result: many cities that have "safe" drinking water have high levels of harmful toxins in the water. Indeed some of the cities on this list meet the standards for safe drinking water. There is a good video that addresses this on Youtube called watercology. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFg76MbeFag>

[Report Abuse](#)**lknjns** 11:35 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

Why should the "good water" areas subsidize the "bad water" areas. This is just as absurd as allowing millions of illegal immigrants into this country to further tax our already limited resources.

[Report Abuse](#)**epublicinfo** 11:30 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

Statement from ECUA Executive Director, Stephen E. Sorrell Subject: Pensacola has worst drinking water in America This issue arose about a year ago (December 12, 2009), at which time I thought the information we supplied adequately demonstrated that the issue was groundless. First, let me reiterate that I know our water is outstanding, meeting or exceeding every standard demanded by the federal and state regulatory agencies. In fact, EWG's report clearly states the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued no violations to the ECUA during the five-year period in question. The following is a brief recap of the information relative to this matter, but we can provide much more detailed information if needed. EWG is a special interest environmental advocacy group, which has an extremely checkered track record. Their goal was (is) to force the Federal EPA to adopt stricter water quality standards. This is a noble goal, but the methodology and scare tactics they are using are unacceptable. Most of the water in the Pensacola area is supplied by the Emerald Coast Utilities Authority and meets or exceeds every single federal and state water quality standard, without exception. Actually, we were our own worst enemy by conducting approximately 75,000 water quality tests in a five year period. The ECUA has 32 wells in its ground-water system, and each well site is considered a water treatment facility. This amount of testing was completely ignored in the EWG report. To make a long story short, we hired the scientists at the University of West Florida (UWF) to analyze our water quality test reports and evaluate the EWG report. They provided a written, unbiased report stating the EWG findings are bogus and they did not use scientific methodology to reach their conclusions. To add some additional strength to my argument because I don't think you will believe me otherwise, our local League of Women Voters held a water quality forum, whose panel of experts included Mr. Richard Wiles, one of EWG's directors. Dr. Richard Snyder, the UWF scientist on the same panel, stated he would give EWG an A for their report and affirmed it was poorly done without scientific merit. Mr. Wiles then admitted in the public meeting to the poor quality of their work, and said "when you don't have any money and want to make a point, this is the only method to get public attention." He apologized to the people at the meeting and said his intentions were honorable. Furthermore, ECUA discovered that the EWG group gets funding through a percentage returned to them from water filter sales driven from links on their website. These are strategically located alongside the report on water quality. This is part of their funding mechanism for their efforts. The more they scare people, the more home water filters are sold, and then the more kickback money they receive to fund their programs. We have learned that they recently also employed the same strategy to drive sales to organic produce, benefitting those growers and marketers. The ECUA supports clean water standards and finds the EWG cause a noble one, but their methods, lack of scientific analyses, the harm they are causing water purveyors throughout the country and most importantly, the anxiety and fear they are causing individuals, is tragic. Their freedom of speech has essentially protected them from legal action. Stephen E. Sorrell, PE Executive Director, ECUA

[Report Abuse](#)**hattie54** 8:46 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(3\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

I lived for a number of years in Southern Calif. My late in-laws had grown up in the NYC area and the water was so good and still is (coz of the water coming from the mntns). Then they moved to Pasadena, Ca. and the water was awful coz it came from the Colorado River. I am back home in NC now and the city water where I am is ok. I miss the mountain water at my late Mother's vacation home in Maggie Valley, NC. That mntn water was so good and my Dad just thought the coffee made with it was out of this world.

[Report Abuse](#)**mark ballard** 8:44 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

There are company's out there that offer Water from Air technology also known as atmospheric water generators. These systems generate water that is 100% free of chlorine, fluoride, lead, recycled water, effluent and other toxic wastes. Most filtration systems remove all trace minerals from the water, thereby producing clean water. However there are systems that are specifically designed to retain the beneficial minerals that keep you healthy whilst removing impurities. So not only does an atmospheric water generator eliminate the need for plastic bottle the water generated with these dispensers costs in the neighborhood of 6 cents per gallon. <http://www.koniafl.com>

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hattie54 8:43 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

Hey Jacob,NC folks drink too much Mt.Dew and Pepsi too.

[Report Abuse](#)**evestar05** 8:00 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(0\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

I live in Pensacola

[Report Abuse](#)**Hi Kwiss!!** 10:10 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

Well, of course you do.

[Report Abuse](#)**starmacs** 6:53 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(2\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

I am very curious what these other states are not testing for, if they didn't participate. Do you have any more knowledge of what data they did not provide? Brenda in Georgia

[Report Abuse](#)**fordjerryfay** 10:05 AM Feb 1, 2011[\(0\)](#) [\(0\)](#)

Brenda, the Safe Drinking Water Act requires public utilities to test water at frequencies and quantity according to size/production. Utilities are required to report test results annually to customers and provide monthly reports to the related state agency. If test results exceed chemical levels, other requirements commence, including public notice and corrective requirements. Too often, for sensationa reporting or in order to frighten consumers into buying individual treatment devices, water test results are improperly construed.

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