THE SPIGOT
from the NORTH DAKOTA RURAL WATER SYSTEMS ASSOCIATION

Always Drink Upstream from the Herd

– Will Rogers

By Rachel Takala, Source Water Protection Specialist

Have you ever really thought about where your drinking water comes from? Growing up, I knew that our farm had a well and that the water was good to drink. I remember drinking water from the hydrant near the garden. In fact, it has a hook fashioned from some fence wire with a metal cup hanging off it still today. Funny how the things we take for granted all our lives are now the things that provide comfort, fond memories and a reason to come home. No, the water is not the reason I return home, but I will not lie, one of the first things I do upon visiting is get a nice, big glass of water. Is our water really that great? Probably not but it is familiar, reliable and thirst-quenching.

Over the years, I have found myself in different places asking if the water was safe to drink or warning nonlocal patrons that the choice of a glass of water may not be the best choice for them. Did I just convince someone to buy a soda over a glass of water to prevent them from potential misery? Yes, bottled water or a soda would have been a better choice, especially if not accustomed to the local water. I was fortunate as a child to have access to quality drinking water, so this was a humbling moment for sure. Many of us take that for granted.

One summer I worked on a ranch in western North Dakota where the drinking water had to be distilled. A few years later, I would hear about the construction of a new rural water system in northeast Montana; a foreign idea to me at the time, piping treated water for miles and miles. How could this be an economical idea? And again, in central Montana I would hear about the use of reverse osmosis as a method of treating drinking water rather than hauling bottled water. That is when I started paying attention. Water is not something that can be taken for granted. It is not always readily available or safe for consumption, a natural resource dependent on the geology and hydrology of the land where you live. Did you know that less than 1% of the world's water is usable? The rest is salt water, ice or underground.

The Wellhead Protection Program, now the Source Water Protection Program (SWPP), was created by the Safe Drinking Water Act amendments of 1986. Further amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1996 required a source water assessment for all public water systems. The SWPP is a joint project with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the National Rural Water Association (NRWA), a nonprofit water and wastewater utility membership organization.

The ND Department of Environmental Quality (NDDEQ) completes the source water assessment which includes source water delineation, a contaminant source inventory and a susceptibility analysis. The public water system is responsible for the development and implementation of voluntary elements.

A management strategy will outline the actions the system can initiate to protect the quality of the water in the delineated protection area. The contingency plan is developed to remain on file for use during an emergency. This plan will include site-specific information about your public water system, including short and long-term solutions to the temporary loss of your public water supply source. Systems planning to construct new groundwater wells or surface water intakes should implement source water protection prior to the initiation of any well drilling activities. Construction plans and specifications must be submitted to the NDDEQ-Division of Municipal Facilities for review and approval.

How can I help? As the Source Water Protection specialist with ND Rural Water Systems Association (NDRWSA), I can help in creating a local team of citizens and individuals from federal, state, local and private organizations. Who best to protect your water source than your community? Through collaboration, we will create your Source Water Protection plan. The plan will identify actions that farmers, ranchers and other local entities can implement to prevent source water pollution.

Program goals are to prevent contamination of public water supplies, encourage placement of certain activities in areas less likely to contaminate public water supplies, and raise public awareness of water resources used for public water supplies.

Your public water supply is an important resource concern and protecting it is critical. The SWPP works at a grassroots level to educate and inform rural residents on measures to prevent water pollution and improve water quality. Through local cooperation it is the community that helps create the Source Water Protection Plan and is invested in its success. Keeping the consumers informed and encouraging public participation are essential to a successful SWPP plan.

Now, take a minute and think about what you know. Where does your drinking water come from? Do you really know? Is it a private ground water well, public water system, surface water, treated or untreated? And most importantly, are you upstream from the herd? Contact the NDRWSA for technical support in creating your source water plan.