Contaminated by orange groves? Rural Alva wells to be tested for pesticides

Residents worry contaminated well water is making them sick. Andrew West and Janine Zeitlin/news-press.com

Years after residents and government officials raised worries about pesticides in orange-grove swaddled Charleston Park, the health department plans to sample seven wells for more than 40 pesticides and fumigants.

Charleston Park is tucked off State Road 80 in rural Alva. The roughly 200 residents, most of them low-income and African-American, rely on private wells served by groundwater that has been described by experts as non-potable. Well water has failed tests for total coliform bacteria, salts, radium, and other contaminants.

In recent years, government testing has focused on bacteria and nitrates, not pesticides. Seven wells adjacent to agricultural land will be tested in early July, said the health department. The move comes after an advocate reached out to the state health department after she said she found pesticides in well water at a Charleston Park home. The positive results came from store-bought testing kits she used with her son as part of his high school science project.

“What was the most alarming was we found the pesticides when we did the over-the-counter test kits and that pesticides had not been tested in the wells out there previously when there was indication there could have been pesticides,” said Kerry Constantine of Blankets & Blessings, the Lee County group behind Clean Water for Charleston Park.

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Residents have intermittently voiced water quality concerns to agencies for decades but few solutions materialized until Clean Water for Charleston Park responded after The News-Press report on the largely unknown problem.
“I don’t know what the county’s reason is for not testing it. Everybody’s got an opinion, mine could be my wrong, but it should have been tested already,” said Ella Christmas, 61, who owns one of the roughly 15 Charleston Park homes that received a reverse osmosis system and other related improvements through Blankets & Blessings.

She used to break out in rashes from her water. Now, “it’s great.”

Charleston Park resident, Ella Christmas displays a scar left from a rash she had on and off for ten years. She believes it was caused by her well water. She believes race is a factor as to why the government has not found a solution to the water problems of Charleston Park. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

Constantine reached out to the Florida Department of Health after the pesticide results and finding an existing health department program to test wells suspected of agricultural contamination. She wonders why such testing for Charleston Park was not pursued earlier. Members of Clean Water for Charleston Park have been in contact with local government officials, including health department staffers, for months and no mention was made of such programs, Constantine noted.

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The health department has done cheaper tests for bacteria and nitrates. Two of six Charleston Park wells tested in 2015 for nitrates reached more halfway to the maximum contaminant level. Scientists who reviewed the results for The News-Press and even the health department staffer working on the issue at the time said more testing was needed. Wells with nitrates may indicate pesticide contamination.

“It’s not like a big smoking gun. It’s just like yeah, maybe there is a problem,” Geordie Smith, an environmental manager for the state health department in Lee County, told The News-Press in January 2016. “I’d like to test every well for a whole range of pesticides and fertilizers but I can’t. And even if I did I would need damning evidence there was a big problem … I’d like to get more data.”
Smith resigned in January 2018. Current local administrators said pesticide testing is not routine. Tests cost about $400 a sample.

“It is reserved for when nitrates levels present high or another test indicates more in depth testing is warranted,” wrote Brian Bates and Angela Smith of the Florida Department of Health in Lee County in an email. They said they were unavailable to be interviewed by phone and noted that the 2015 test results were “acceptable.”

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If pesticide results surpass safe drinking water standards, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection could offer help after confirming the result. “That assistance generally comes in the form of connection to a central water supply (if available) or a filter system,” wrote the local administrators.

Meanwhile, Clean Water for Charleston Park has put in a high-volume reverse osmosis station in the Charleston Park community center. Essentially, the system allows everyone access to clean water. Before, residents had to drive to refill jugs or buy water.

There is no regular public transportation. Donations from Faith United Methodist Church in Fort Myers covered half of the $9,000 system, Constantine said. The group has also supplied the center with testing kits so residents can test their own water.

At least a few residents come every day to refill jugs with some people coming twice a week, said LaShay Russ, Charleston Park resident coordinator. The station is particularly helpful to the many renters without reverse osmosis systems and bad water. “We know there’s still something in the water. It’s definitely a great help.”