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Water transition to begin Monday

Interactive map will allow customers to track progress of Lake Michigan water supply

Waukesha Water Utility customers will be able to track the progress of the city's new water supply online once the switch to Lake Michigan water begins on Monday morning, October 9. The interactive map is a tool that will be available on the Waukesha Water Utility website as early as Wednesday, however no activity will be visible until Monday.

The Waukesha Water Utility has said that the change from groundwater to Lake Michigan water will occur within the first five days for about 90% of its customers. But for customers on the edges of the utility's service area or at dead ends and cul-de-sacs, it may take as long as three to four weeks for the new water supply to reach them. The water utility must move approximately 50 million gallons of water through more than 300 miles of water mains over the course of several weeks, starting on the east side of Waukesha.

"The most common request from city residents has been for more certainty about when the water will reach their home or business," Mayor Shawn Reilly said. "I thank the utility for being responsive to concerns by developing an interactive map. That will help customers track the progress of the lake water through the city.

"Having this information will help residents understand when the new water supply may reach them, so they can watch for potential issues like discolored water," Reilly said. "The map will also help our business customers who need to make adjustments for the water supply."

Blue areas on the map will indicate where the utility has confirmed the presence of Lake Michigan water by taking samples from hydrants being flushed. However, lake water may also be present in areas that are not yet blue on the map.

The switch from the city's groundwater supply to 100% Lake Michigan water from Milwaukee was originally planned for mid-September. The utility pushed the date pack to October 9 to provide more certainty about the timing of the change and to better address issues that came up during preparations.

“The utility’s priority has been to minimize inconveniences that may occur during the transition,” the mayor said. “The extra time gave utility staff time to ensure the best product. For example, utility officials decided to empty the new above-ground reservoirs and refill them in order to minimize any potential taste or odor problems during the transition. It also addressed programming issues that had developed with its new water pumps during startup testing.

Waukesha’s current groundwater supply is severely depleted and contaminated with naturally occurring radium. The city is under a court order to provide drinking water that complies with radium standards.

“After 20 years of studies, permit applications and planning, we are excited to be reaching our goal. Waukesha will forever have a sustainable supply of drinking water.” Reilly said.

Customers can find a link to answers to frequently asked questions about the transition at www.waukesha-water.com, as well as in utility bill inserts and other communications. The city provides regular updates on social media (@cityofwaukesha) and provides a weekly e-newsletter. Residents can sign up for the e-newsletter at waukesha-wi.gov/newsletter. Customers can also call the water utility staff at 262-521-5272 for answers to questions.

One permanent difference with the transition is a change in the disinfection process from chlorine, that Waukesha has used, to chloramines that are used by Milwaukee. Both disinfectants are commonly used by water utilities to ensure public health protection and the change should be generally unnoticeable. However, kidney dialysis patients should contact their dialysis center for guidance on any needed modification to in-home dialysis procedures. Also, owners of fish, reptiles and amphibians should consult local pet stores about required changes in water treatment.

For most customers, the potential issue to be alert for will be discolored water. “Discolored water, if a customer has it at all, should last a couple of days, or less, at individual locations. This is similar to what can occur during the annual flushing of city water mains, as the normal build-up of sediment in pipes is stirred up by water movement.

Utility officials said the reddish water is aesthetically unappealing but does not pose an immediate human health risk. They had advised customers with discolored water to avoid doing laundry, making ice or using the water until it runs clear. If water users accidentally stain their laundry, they should avoid drying and can use rust removers such as Red-B-Gone or Iron Out to remove stains. Rust removers are available at hardware and other stores. The water utility will also have a limited supply of them available.

Flushing pipes is typically the best way to resolve discolored water problems. Remove the screens or aerators from the ends of the indoor faucets to prevent clogging. Then run all of the ***cold-water*** faucets wide-open and simultaneously for three to five minutes. During that time, also flush each toilet two or three times. Turn off the water and reinstall the aerators.

The large flow of water through the pipes will generally dislodge any buildup of organic material that is causing discoloration or other issues. For a typical house, the cost of the water used in this process should be less than a dollar.

The utility also recommends removing or bypassing in-home water filtration systems – like the ones used with some refrigerator water dispensers or attached to kitchen faucets – before the start of the transition. Customers should also bypass any reverse osmosis (RO) system if they have one. Customers can resume using filters again in a normal manner after the transition, or after they've flushed their system and the water runs clear.

Reilly said the Milwaukee Water Works supplies more than 860,000 people in 16 area communities with water. "Most people who receive Lake Michigan water are not using softeners because Lake Michigan water is at least 60% softer than our current groundwater. The utility has suggested that people bypass their softeners for a month or two to see if they are satisfied without a softener," he said.

Customers should check their user manual or look online for bypass instructions for their softener model. Simply unplugging the softener will not bypass it. Additional details about softeners are available at www.waukesha-wi.gov/watersoftener.

During the transition, some customers may also notice a chlorine-like smell or taste. This is a result of the disinfectant levels being temporarily increased to ensure a safe drinking water supply. Once the transition is complete, the disinfectant levels will return to normal. Customers may also notice a subtle permanent change in the taste of water because the new supply has fewer naturally occurring minerals than groundwater.

The Waukesha Water Utility serves the 72,000 residents of the city, as well as some residents in the City of Pewaukee and the Village of Waukesha.

As the utility provides Lake Michigan water to its customers, it will also be recycling water back to the Great Lakes Basin. Approximately 100% of the volume of water withdrawn from the lake, after use in Waukesha, will be treated and returned to the Root River. From there it will flow to Lake Michigan. The additional clean water being returned via the Root River will provide a needed improvement to river flow and help the fishery by improving spawning.

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