



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB1069

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

March 31st, 2021 • Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

What the Bill Does:

HB1069 as amended would require property owners to disclose results to tenants of the most recent water quality test once a lease has been signed and notify tenants after any water quality test is conducted, which will be every three years. If a test finds that a private water well is contaminated, then the owner of the property must notify the Maryland Department of the Environment and/or their county department of health and restore the water supply back to a safe uncontaminated state.

We worked on these amendments with the Maryland Department of the Environment, county health directors, realtors, and landlords, all of whom agree that this is an easy and sensible first step to take to protect the health of Marylanders. Over the interim period, we will be creating a fully funded well water safety program proposal for next year's legislative session.

Why the Bill is Important:

Two million Marylanders rely on private wells for their drinking water, but water quality protections are few and far between. In fact, according to a recent report from the Center for Progressive Reform, our state offers fewer protections for private wells than almost any other state. While Maryland does require new wells to meet certain safety thresholds, this policy is insufficient because the quality of well water can degrade over time.

The most worrying contaminant in private wells is nitrates, which often pollute groundwater due to the overapplication of fertilizer or manure. Since they are odorless, colorless and tasteless, nitrates often go unnoticed. High nitrate levels in drinking water are linked to a condition fatal to infants called blue baby syndrome. They are also associated with cancer and pregnancy complications.

Nitrate contamination is a statewide concern, but is particularly alarming for communities on the Lower Shore. Roughly 4% of wells tested in Wicomico and Worcester counties had extremely unsafe levels of nitrates—one well's nitrate levels was 14 times higher than an EPA threshold—and

about 10% of wells had levels that might be hazardous to health. And residents are mostly in the dark about these risks and the safety of their wells. A recent survey found that about 75% of Lower Shore well owners either hadn't tested their wells in more than a year or had never tested their wells.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably:

Maryland's hands-off approach to private wells hurts working-class Marylanders and Marylanders of color the most. The areas of the state most vulnerable to nitrate contamination are more impoverished than the state average. Safe drinking water is a human right, and we must ensure all Marylanders have access to it. This program would be a modest, but important step in that direction.

I urge a favorable report.