



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB1069

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

February 24th, 2021 • Environment and Transportation Committee

What the Bill Does:

HB1069 would create a well safety program in Maryland that helps cover the cost of private well tests and the remediation of contaminated wells. The program would resemble an insurance program for private wells. If purchasing a home with a private well, the buyer would pay a small fee—about \$50 on average—at the time of closing. The homeowner would then be able to access a fund to defray the cost of well testing and, if necessary, remediation.

The bill would also create a public database of test results and require property owners to disclose results to tenants and buyers.

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.