



The Mercury

A Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper

Vol. 55 No. 140

Pottstown, Pa. (19464) Tuesday Morning, March 11, 1986

35¢ A COPY
32 Pages — 4 Sections
\$1.95 A WEEK
HOME DELIVERY

THE WEATHER

Expect a 30 percent chance of morning showers today, changing to partly sunny weather by this afternoon as the high climbs into the mid 60s. Tonight will be clear and cool with a low in the mid 30s. Increasing cloudiness Wednesday with a high around 50. For more details, see page 3.

Drunk driving log
NONE TODAY

Federal probe of new prison requested

By RICHARD BRAUNSBURG
Mercury Staff Writer

LOWER PROVIDENCE — Township supervisors called for a federal investigation Monday into allegations of shoddy workmanship at a county prison nearing completion here, responding to residents' fears of becoming virtual prisoners of the facility.

After listening to former prison general contractor Frank E. Skepton and concerns of township residents, five motions for investigations "to provide for the security and safety of our residents" were approved before a crowd of about 90 people.

"My own feelings have never changed; I've been totally opposed to this facility from day one," said

Supervisor Mary S. Ralston. "I wish it had never been put here. I will fight to turn it into something else, but if it is going to remain a prison, I will fight to the last day to make sure it is the safest prison."

The first four motions asked the U.S. attorney's office for an independent investigation by the Federal Bureau of Corrections; Gov. Dick Thornburgh's support of the investigation; state Sen. Edwin G. Holl (R-24th) for a state Senate investigation, and state Rep. Joseph Lashinger (R-150th) for a similar investigation in the state House of Representatives.

The last motion instructed Richard Sheehan, township solicitor, to ask the courts to stop all construction on the prison until rulings are given on several pending court cases filed by the township, most of which deal

with the county circumventing township zoning and building codes.

Skepton, fired on Feb. 23 by the Montgomery County Commissioners for being behind schedule, repeated several allegations of poor workmanship at the site. The prison, supposedly 94 percent completed, was scheduled to be finished on March 28, a deadline county officials felt Skepton could not have met.

Monday night, Skepton maintained he was actually fired for not staying silent about cost-cutting by John Maloney, hired as an architect by the county to supervise construction, that resulted in such serious safety concerns as security devices that will not work, cheap plastic plumbing substituted for iron and windows that could be "scratched with a paper towel."

The plumbing contractor, Precision Piping Inc. of Cornwalls Heights, replaced iron plumbing with cheaper versions made of polyvinyl chloride for about \$250,000 in savings that were never passed on to the county, Skepton claimed.

Detention equipment was manufactured by Pencor, the manufacturing arm of the state Bureau of Corrections that usually gets orders for pillows or bunk beds. That equipment, including cell doors, is junk that will never work, Skepton said.

The shatterproof plastic used for windows at the prison can easily be melted or cracked and is no longer used in prisons at the thickness level used at the fa-

(Continued on page 3)

Pottstown acting on waste issue

By SEAN MCKINNEY
Mercury Staff Writer

POTTSTOWN — Is the borough the target of a potentially unpopular waste disposal or transfer operation?

It certainly appeared so Monday night after borough council rushed to pass a resolution declaring the borough zoning ordinance invalid as it relates to landfills, solid waste incineration, trash-to-steam plants and solid waste transfer stations.

The resolution is the first step toward passing a curative amendment that would allow these activities in either Pottstown's light or heavy manufacturing zones. "It has not been decided which zone yet," said Borough Manager Thomas Harwood, indicating the curative amendment will not be ready for adoption for "a month or so."

Harwood said the resolution was a standard procedure laying the

Surprise, relief flow from water probe

Results must be compared to standards

What are you drinking?



EDITOR'S NOTE: Mercury reporter Bob Montgomery has

By BOB MONTGOMERY
Mercury Staff Writer

EXETER TOWNSHIP — When Susan Olson was told she had toluene and ethyl benzene in her drinking water, she didn't know what to think.

She was told that toluene and ethyl benzene are components of gasoline and shouldn't be found in a public drinking water supply.

But she didn't panic. She calmly waited until a second test on her water was done, and until she could find out if the levels found were high.

Her patience paid off. She learned one week after the initial report that her water is safe to drink.

"I did go out and buy bottled water," said Olson, of 20 Ironstone Drive, Crestwood. "It alarmed me. It honestly did."



three-county area and sent them to Suburban Water Testing Laboratories in Frederick. One round of samples was tested for industrial solvents and volatiles such as chloroform, TCE and PCE and a second round of samples was tested for bacteria and coliform levels — which measures the effect of chlorine purification efforts.

While The Mercury survey found several locales with specific problems — TCE, a carcinogen, in high levels in Collegeville and Trappe; elements of gasoline in Exeter — the general finding was that municipal water systems in our area are providing their customers with safe, if not pure, drinking water.

three-month long investigation by The Mercury ranged from surprise to relief.

Al Wyda, a Glen Alsace official, was also surprised when first told of the results from Olson's water sample.

He reserved comment until his utility got its own sample from the Olson residence and tested it.

On Friday, he got the results, which also confirmed the presence of toluene and benzene, as well as two xylenes also found in The Mercury sample.

Wyda's assistant, Bill Evans, responded. "They (Quality Control Laboratories of Southampton, which ran the test for Glen Alsace) found traces of these," said Evans. "But they have no impact on the health and

welfare of the consumer public.

"The tests themselves are meaningless unless they are compared to standards." He was right.

The amounts found by The Mercury and Glen Alsace, re-

spectively, were practically the same: 8.1 ppb and 7.0 ppb of toluene; 1.8 ppb and 2.4 ppb of ethyl benzene. The Mercury found 7.9 ppb of M & P xylene and 2.3 ppb of o-xylene, while Glen Alsace found 3.4 ppb of the

two xylenes combined.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in the Nov. 15, 1985 edition of the "Federal Register," announced its proposed recommended maxi-

(Continued on page 5)



Photo by Robert Billman

FILL 'ER UP — John Olson, 7, son of Harold and Susan Olson, 20 Ironstone Drive, Exeter Township, gets ready to drink a glass of water from the kitchen tap — the same tap which turned out a sample containing small amounts of four chemicals that are components of gasoline. Fortunately for the Olson family, the amounts were only at trace levels and do not affect the safety of the water. But Mrs. Olson was biting her nails until a second test by the water supplier confirmed the water safety. Reactions to The Mercury's three-month water probe ranged from surprise to relief.

Those in charge of your water

By BOB MONTGOMERY
Mercury Staff Writer

The Mercury survey of municipal water systems tested the drinking water in 13 separate systems. Here is an informational breakdown of those systems:

POTTSTOWN — Serves around 35,000 customers. Owned by the borough, operated by water authority. The \$3.5 million filtration plant, built in 1966, is located on Old Reading Pike, Stowe. Serves residents of Pottstown and portions of West Pottsgrove, Upper Pottsgrove, Lower Pottsgrove, and North Coventry townships. About 5.5 million gallons of water used daily.

Water comes from Schuylkill River, and is pumped through a screen to remove leaves and sticks, then to plant. Water treated with alum (aluminum sulfate) to clarify the water and collect impurities. It is not considered harmful. Caustic soda is then added to water to adjust pH level. Water is then mixed and goes into sedimentation basins where further impurities are removed. It then goes through a bed of sand and gravel in the final filtration process. From there it goes through an underground drainage system, and then to a clear well below a filter.

From there it is pumped to reservoirs and an 8.5 million gallon storage tank on North Hanover Street, a 500,000 gallon tank at Jackson Street, a 250,000 gallon tank in Lower Pottsgrove, and a 500,000 gallon tank in North Coventry; reservoirs on Berks Street in Stowe, and a 4-million-gallon reservoir on Washington Hill. Water then dispersed to customers through service lines about an inch in diameter.

Bacteria tests and chlorine tests are run every two hours and recorded on a daily sheet. Each month, the results are sent in to the state Department of Environmental Resources. Borough is required to submit a minimum of 40 bacteriological samples each month. Chemical testing done occasionally, and done by a private laboratory.

SPRING CITY-ROYERSFORD — Roughly 3,800 customers served by Citizens Utilities Home Water Company, 135 N. Fourth Ave., Royersford. Also served are customers in portions of Upper Providence, Limerick and East Vincent townships, as well as Merlin Hills housing development in Kimberton.

Around 1.3 million gallons a day used by residential, commercial, industrial users. Water comes from Schuylkill River, a well in East Vincent Township and two wells in Upper Providence Township. Wells greater than 200 feet deep. Storage reservoir located in East Vincent Township. Storage tank in Mingo.

Wells are chlorinated. Water from river treated with chemicals at filtration plant. Bacteriological tests submitted to DER weekly. Organic and inorganic tests submitted annually.

PHOENIXVILLE — Borough owned and operated system. Around 20,000 customers in Phoenixville, Upper Providence, Schuylkill and East Pikeland townships.

Around 3.5 million gallons a day used. Water comes from Schuylkill River at filtration plant in borough's north end.

Chlorine added to water, as well as caustic soda (for pH), alum (to remove muddy color), potassium (for taste), florine (for tooth decay prevention), carbon (for taste and odor). Bacteriological tests taken daily. Organics and inorganics tested for once a year.

COLLEGEVILLE-TRAPPE — Owned and operated by both boroughs, Collegeville-Trappe Joint Water Works, First Avenue, Trappe. Serves around 1,250 customers in Collegeville and Trappe.

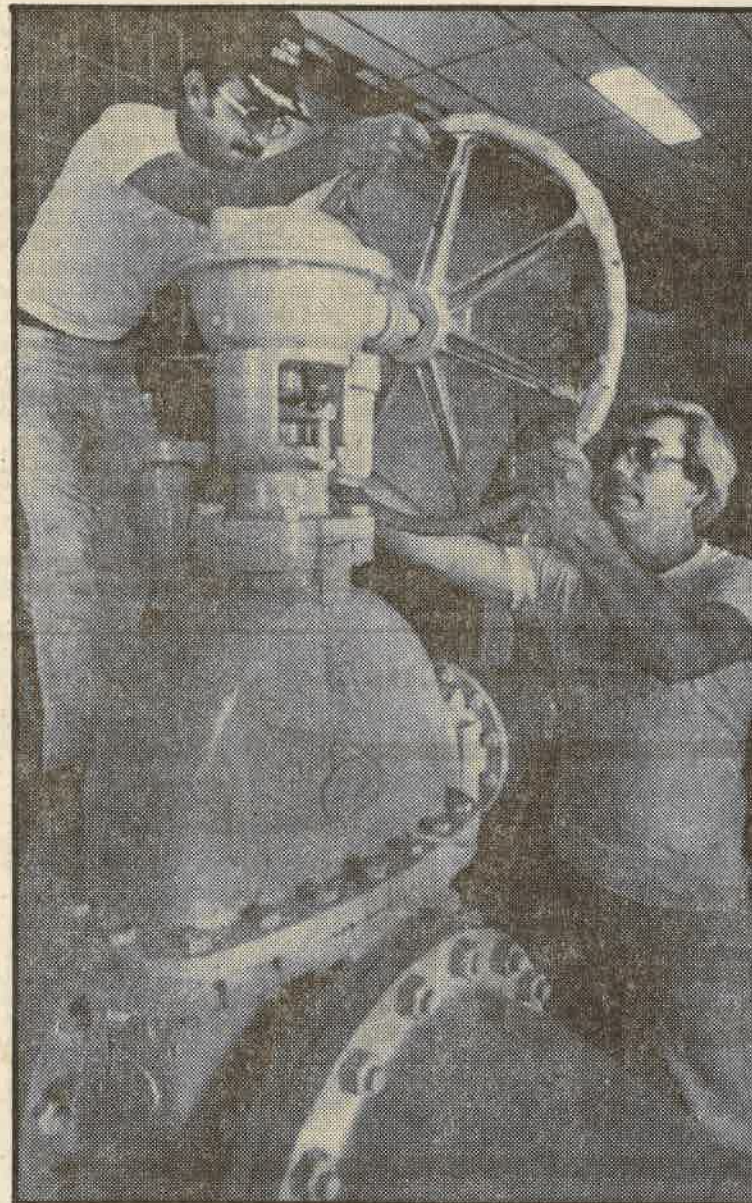
Around 500,000 gallons a day are used. Water comes from eight wells throughout the two boroughs, ranging in depth from 500 to 800 feet.

Chlorine added to wells. No filtration or other additives. Monthly bacteriological tests submitted to DER. Also tested monthly are tests for TCE and PCE. Other chemicals and metals are tested semi-annually.

BALLY — Owned and operated by Bally Municipal Authority. Serves around 1,150 customers, majority in borough. A few also served in Washington Township.

About 100,000 gallons a day used. Water drawn from well, around 300 feet deep, on Main Street, and from a spring along side a hill just west of the borough.

Well water treated by gas chlorination. Water stored in concrete



Mercury Photo by Tom Kelly
WATER CONTROL — Joe Shemansky (left) and Dave Almond, both employees at the Pottstown Water Filtration Plant, Stowe, know that opening a large valve at the plant is a two-man job. Municipal water suppliers all over the area not only have the responsibility to provide our homes with water, but to provide us with safe water. In Pottstown, residents can be assured that their water is safe to drink.

Bacteriological tests submitted to DER semi-monthly; inorganics tested for each month. A former well, located between Fourth and Fifth Street west of Cherry Street, drilled in 1977 and in use from 1979-82 was closed in 1982 due to chemical contamination. Bids will be awarded soon for a new well to be drilled in eastern portion of borough, north of Seventh and Pine streets.

BOYERTOWN — Owned and operated by borough at Boyertown Water Farm near Gablesville. Serves around 6,500 Boyertown customers, and residents in Colebrookdale and Douglass (Montgomery) townships.

Around 750,000 gallons a day used. Water drawn from Boyertown Reservoir (34,600,000 gallons capacity) on Powder Mill Hollow Road in

pumped from Ironstone Creek at Ironstone Creek Road near Philadelphia Avenue.

Water subjected to filtration in aeration tank at plant near reservoir. Chlorine, alum and carbon added during mixing. Water then goes to clear well where lime, chlorine and ammonia added.

Bacteriological tests conducted weekly; organic and inorganic sampling every couple years. Radiation tests, including a search for presence of radon, conducted twice in 1985.

EAST GREENVILLE — Owned and operated by borough (East Greenville Water Works). Serves all borough residents, roughly 850 customers.

Around 200,000 gallons a day used. Water drawn from well on State Road and Water Street. Bacteria tests weekly.

Water is filtered, treated with chlorination and a disinfectant. Chemicals added to water to control taste, odor and turbidity. Bacteria test results submitted weekly to DER.

SCHWENKSVILLE — Owned and operated by borough municipal authority, Schwenksville Water Department, Main and Church streets.

Serves 1,800 customers within borough. Water drawn from four wells, ranging from 275 to 500 feet deep. Wells located at Hilcrest and Summit avenues; 657 Main St.; Lion Hill and Highland avenues; Centennial and Main streets.

Water is chlorinated at the source. Nothing else added to water.

Bacteriological tests submitted to DER twice monthly.

PENNSBURG — Owned and operated by Upper Hanover Authority, Third and Penn streets, Pennsburg. Serves 965 customers in borough.

Water drawn from three wells — two located in Hereford Township; one in Upper Hanover Township near Pennsburg.

Wells are chlorinated. Bacteriological tests submitted to DER every month; volatiles tested every three years; TCE tests conducted by authority sporadically.

RED HILL — Water supplied by borough water authority, which works in conjunction with the Upper Hanover Authority. Number of customers not known, but authority serves borough residents. Water drawn from reservoir near Hereford, and flows by gravity to elevated tank at Red Hill Fire Hall. Water also drawn from well on East Sixth Street in Upper Hanover Township.

BIRDSBORO — Owned, operated by Birdsboro Municipal Authority, 113 E. Main St., Birdsboro.

Serves 1,350 customers in Birdsboro, portions of eastern Union Township, and a few in lower Exeter Township.

Water drawn from Hay Creek, Dyer Quarry reservoir, Indian Run reservoir, Stinson Run reservoir. Around 750,500 gallons a day used. Consumption down in recent years due to decline in production at Birdsboro Corp.

Water is chlorinated and softened. Five bacteriological tests taken each monthly; some metals tested for each year; radioactivity tested every three years.

EXETER TOWNSHIP — Major supplier is Glen Alsace Water Co., Wyomissing, which serves residents in Crestwood, Reiffton, Lorane. Another company, Exeter Artesian Water Co., Shillington, serves Farming Ridge and other portions. Smaller companies serve relatively few customers, one of which is AVW Inc., Birdsboro, owned by Donald Peifer — operator of FR&S Landfill. Trailer parks with their own systems include Bordic's, Smith's; Keystone, Fidler, Rigg's.

Glen Alsace, owned by Citizens Utility Home Water Co., serves around 2,000 customers.

Around 750,000 gallons used daily. Water drawn from seven wells: two near Reading Mall, three wells along Butter Lane, two at Linstead.

Wells are chlorinated. Weekly bacteriological tests conducted. Annual organic and inorganic tests done.

Little information is available on the AVW Inc. water system. There are reportedly 150 to 200 customers on the system, in the eastern portion of Exeter Township. Peifer, the reported owner, refused to talk when reached by The Mercury. Water is reportedly drawn from two or three wells between Route 422 and Route 82.

DOUGLASSVILLE — Owned, operated by Douglassville Water Co., Park Lane Shopping Center, Douglassville. Serves Amity Gardens and other small portions near Douglassville.

The plant manager and operator did not return calls despite numerous

Water probe draws mixed reaction

(Continued from page one)

imum contaminant levels (RMCLs) for those chemicals — 2,000 ppb of toluene; 680 ppb of ethyl benzene; and 440 ppb for xylene.

Thus, the levels found in the Olson sample are considered only trace amounts. That was good news to Olson and water company officials.

"When we saw these samples, we wondered where we are in relationship to these standards," Evans said. "Our major concern is not the fact what's in it —

we're not challenging the analyses. Our major concern is we hope it doesn't scare the public into a situation they don't understand."

Olson was relieved to learn that the chemicals in her water should have no effect on her family's health.

"As long as it's safe to drink, we will continue to drink it," she said. "I'd still like to see them fix the problem. A lot of time the EPA levels are very high, and I don't know why they would put such a high limit

on the standards."

Wyda and Evans said they didn't know the source of the chemicals, but said they have been in contact with the state Department of Environmental Resources and will closely monitor any change in levels.

About 20 miles east of Crestwood, high amounts of trichloroethylene (TCE) — 28 ppb — were found in a Collegeville municipal water sample.

The sample was taken from a back room sink at the Community Counseling Services offices, 363 Main St., Collegeville. The offices are located next door to borough hall.

Unlike toluene's recommended level of 2,000 ppb, TCE's proposed maximum level is only 5 ppb. Thus, the Collegeville sample exceeds the RMCL by over five times.

"If it would be unsafe, DER would not let us supply the people with it," said Lloyd Sassaman, plant superintendent of the Collegeville-Trappe Joint Water System, which draws water from eight wells.

"We have people come in from DER, and when the water's blended, you don't have it (TCE). People fearful of it are buying spring water. I'm drinking it and my grandchildren are drinking it. It's well water and it's good."

Workers at the counseling center said the results didn't really matter to them since they don't drink it anyway. They use bottled spring water.

Sassaman said he is required to test for TCE, and PCE (short for perchloroethylene or tetrachloroethylene) every month.

Pottstown's results which showed varying amounts of cancer-causing trihalomethanes didn't surprise Ed Grubb, water treatment plant operator.

"They're still low for trihalomethanes," said Grubb. "They're not supposed go over 100. They rarely go over 100."

Trihalomethanes found in Pottstown's water include chloroform, bromodichloromethane, and chlorodibromomethane. The other chemical belonging to the trihalomethane group — bromoform — was not found in any samples. The highest total amount of trihalomethanes in the three samples from Pottstown was 33 ppb, about one-third the allowable maximum limit.

"We checked with our engineers, and the readings you got were below maximum levels," said Grubb. "It's nothing to be really worried about."

Rick Stump, laboratory director at Suburban Water Testing Laboratories, Frederick, said the trihalomethanes are the result of chlorine being added to water to kill bacteria.

He said chlorine is a "two-edged sword, cutting down bacterial levels with the forward swing and then swinging back with a cancer risk (in trihalomethanes) and the possibility of some unknown side effects."

Grubb said Pottstown has more problems with water in the summer, when the river is low and bacteria is present in higher concentrations.

"In the summer months we get complaints about odors and taste sometimes," said Grubb. "We make sure we've got the right amount of chlorine in there."

Mary Geri of Spring City, whose water contained only trace amounts of trihalomethanes, said she was confident all along that her water was safe.

"As far as I'm concerned, it didn't scare me," she said. "I've been drinking all these years. It hasn't hurt me yet."

Robert Levengood of Boyertown, whose water also passed the test, said he never worried either.

"I've lived in town all my life and drank the water," he said. "I'm not worried about it. I feel if the water affects me, there's a lot of other people in town it should affect, too."

Boyertown Borough Manager Robert Layman sounded relieved, but confident, to hear that his town's water passed The Mercury's test.

"I'm glad to hear something like that — that somebody has gone out independently and come up with the same results we have had," said Layman. "I appreciate you doing that. I would say it just confirms what we, ourselves, knew."



WATER OKAY — The Harold and Susan Olson family of 20 Ironstone Drive, Exeter Township, show appreciation of their tap water with a family toast. Test results showed their water to contain four chemicals commonly found in gasoline. But after a little research, the Olsons were told that the amounts were in extremely small quantities, and that their water is okay to drink.

Photo by Robert Billman

Suit ties deaths to tainted water

BOSTON (AP) — An attorney for eight families asked a federal jury Monday to find two major corporations guilty of polluting public drinking water wells, causing an outbreak of childhood leukemia and the deaths of five children.

But attorneys for W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods said chemicals from their plants in Woburn did not get into the water. And they said that even if they did, there was no credible scientific evidence that the chemicals could have caused the cancer outbreak.

The opening arguments in federal court marked the start of an expected seven months of testimony in the case, which has attracted national attention for its potential in defining what recourse citizens have from companies they accuse of polluting their neighborhood.

A state health study found the cancer mortality rate in Woburn between 1969 and 1978 was 13 percent higher than the statewide rate. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported the incidence of childhood leukemia was seven times higher than expected in the East Woburn neighborhood.

Attorney Jan Richard Schlichtman, representing the families, asked the jury to "make a statement to ensure the tragedy in Woburn will never be allowed to happen again."

Schlichtman said the companies were negligent in allowing chemicals to be dumped on their property in the Boston suburb, which has experienced toxic waste problems for more than 100 years.

He said the waste eventually migrated to two city wells that served the neighborhood where the cluster of leukemia cases and other health problems were reported. The wells were shut down in 1979 after high levels of contamination were found.

The waste was "dumped into the ground by companies that didn't care ... about the community's health, companies that knew what they were doing was wrong ... (and) could hurt people, but companies who chose to do it anyway," Schlichtman said.

A federal Environmental Protection Agency study found that three "plumes" of contamination affected the wells, two coming from Grace and Beatrice, Schlichtman said. The other was said to come from the Unifirst Corp., which operated a dry cleaning plant in the area and settled out of court with the eight families.

W.R. Grace attorney Michael Keating said the firm used practices that were generally accepted in the 1960s and early 1970s for disposing of trichloroethylene, or TCE, one of the main pollutants found in the wells.



Photo by Robert Billman

WHICH IS PURER? — Harry, the pet goldfish at the Harold and Susan Olson residence in Exeter Township, swims around his fishbowl in the background while a glass of tap water stands in the foreground. The family recently learned that although their water contains some chemicals, the amounts are small and do not affect the quality of their water.

Locations tested

Here is a list of the locations from where The Mercury took water samples for testing:

- Pottstown 1 — 400 block, Spruce Street (North End)
- Pottstown 2 — 1400 block, Cherry Street (East End)
- Pottstown 3 — 400 block, Laurelwood Road, North Coventry Township
- Spring City — 300 block, Pikeland Avenue
- Royersford — 700 block, Church Street
- Phoenixville — 200 block, Washington Avenue
- Collegeville — 300 block, Main Street
- Trappe — West Third Street
- Bally — 100 block, North Seventh Street
- Boyertown 1 — 600 block, Rhoads Avenue (East End)
- Boyertown 2 — Fairview Street (West End)
- East Greenville — 200 block, Main Street
- Schwenksville — 500 block, Main Street
- Pennsburg — Sixth and Dotts streets
- Birdsboro — 100 block, North Walnut Street
- Hay Creek — One-half mile south of Birdsboro
- Exeter 1 — 4,800 block, Partridge Drive, Farming Ridge (north central)
- Exeter 2 — Fairview Chapel Road (southeast)
- Exeter 3 — Ironstone Drive, Crestwood (west)
- Amity Gardens — 400 block, Laurelwood Drive
- Schuylkill River 1 — Birdsboro, along Route 724
- Schuylkill River 2 — North Coventry Township, under Route 100 bridge
- Schuylkill River 3 — Linfield Road, East Coventry Township
- Rockwood Spring Water — Half-gallon glass container
- Diamond Spring Water — Gallon plastic jug
- Red Hill — 100 block, Main Street
- East Coventry well — Schoolhouse Road, private
- South Coventry spring — Harmonyville Road at sharp bend, owned by Great Bear