

Audit Highlights



Highlights of performance audit report on the Bureau of Safe Drinking Water issued on May 2, 2018. Legislative Auditor report # LA18-17.

Background

The mission of the Bureau of Safe Drinking Water (Bureau) is to protect the health of the citizens and visitors of Nevada by ensuring that public water systems provide safe and reliable drinking water. The Bureau is a part of the Division of Environmental Protection, tasked with maintaining Nevada's primary implementation and enforcement authority (primacy) for the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) granted in 1978.

The SDWA aims to protect public water supplies from harmful contaminants. The United States Environmental Protection Agency sets national, enforceable standards to protect against particular contaminants shown to cause health problems. Public water systems are responsible for ensuring that contaminants in drinking water do not exceed the standards, by treating their water, and having it frequently tested by water quality testing laboratories.

The Bureau licenses and regulates public water systems and water quality testing laboratories. Through facility inspections, engineering plan reviews, technical assistance, ongoing monitoring efforts, and enforcement activities, the Bureau assists public water systems in safeguarding the safety of drinking water.

The Bureau regulated 598 public water systems and 97 water quality testing laboratories in fiscal year 2017. The majority (82%) of Nevadans are served by five public water systems. The Bureau had expenditures of about \$3.4 million in fiscal year 2017. Primary funding sources were federal grants and fees.

Purpose of Audit

The purpose of this audit was to determine whether the Bureau is effectively regulating public water systems and water quality testing laboratories to help ensure safe and reliable drinking water. Our audit focused on Bureau activities in fiscal years 2016 and 2017.

Audit Recommendations

This audit report contains three recommendations to strengthen the Bureau's drinking water efforts.

The Bureau accepted the three recommendations.

Recommendation Status

The Bureau's 60-day plan for corrective action is due on July 27, 2018. In addition, the six-month report on the status of audit recommendations is due on January 27, 2019.

Bureau of Safe Drinking Water

Division of Environmental Protection

Summary

The Bureau of Safe Drinking Water (Bureau) ensures that Nevadans are provided with safe and reliable drinking water. The Bureau effectively supervises public water systems and water quality testing laboratories through regular monitoring of water quality samples, facility inspections, and permitting. However, the Bureau did not always inspect laboratories timely. Additionally, for some small water facilities, the Bureau did not follow up on inspection deficiencies. Implementing these enhancements would strengthen the Bureau's drinking water efforts.

Although the Bureau has provided information to school districts regarding a new voluntary project to test for lead in school drinking water, most school districts have not taken advantage of this project funded by a federal grant. After the project's first year, many schools have not yet been tested for lead, though the Division has received commitments for testing from most districts.

Key Findings

Reviews of water quality testing allow the Bureau to identify and address problems with drinking water standards. Water system operators take samples for numerous contaminants frequently, in some cases hundreds every month. Samples are tested by certified water quality testing laboratories and reported directly to the Bureau. Based on our review of testing data and problem follow up, the Bureau monitored water quality results and ensured any problems were resolved timely. (page 4)

The Bureau's water facility inspections provide assurance that public water systems maintain substantial compliance in many key areas designed to ensure water quality and reliability. For 30 public water system inspections we reviewed, inspections were thorough and any issues noted were usually resolved timely. However, in a few instances, some concerns noted during inspections of small water systems were not followed up on until our inquiries. Lastly, we found inspections were timely for all active public water systems. (page 6)

The Bureau has an effective process for reviewing system plans for water operations, ensuring they are prepared and designed appropriately, in accordance with federal and state laws and regulations. Water systems must submit plans for Bureau review and approval. Additions and modifications for facility operations must also be submitted for Bureau review. In our review of 10 addition and modification requests, we found the Bureau conducted thorough assessments. (page 7)

The Bureau's proficiency testing program allows the Bureau to assess and ensure the accuracy of water quality testing conducted by certified laboratories. Water quality testing laboratories are certified in various methods, which are specific types of tests used to assess contaminants. Laboratories must demonstrate to the Bureau that they are proficient in each certified method by accurately testing a water sample provided by an independent third party every 6 months. The proficiency results for 10 laboratories we reviewed were complete and acceptable for each certified method. (page 9)

The Bureau's onsite laboratory inspections provide assurance that water quality testing laboratories have sufficient expertise and procedures to accurately assess water samples. In our review of 28 laboratories, inspections were comprehensive and any issues noted were resolved quickly. However, when we reviewed inspections for all Nevada laboratories, we found that inspections were not always timely. Nevertheless, all inspections were eventually completed, and most untimely inspections were only a few months late. (page 10)

The Bureau has an extensive process for certifying laboratories to perform water quality tests. Laboratory operations are reviewed to ensure compliance with federal and state laws and regulations, as well as several industry best practices adopted by reference in state regulation. These standards, as assessed by the Bureau promote the consistency and accuracy of water quality testing. (page 11)

Although the Bureau has provided information to school districts regarding a new voluntary project to test for lead in school drinking water, most school districts have not taken advantage of this project funded by a 2-year federal grant. After the project's first year, many schools have not yet been tested for lead, though the Division has received commitments for testing from most districts. For those tested, a very small portion showed unacceptable lead levels at one or more water fixtures. These incidents were resolved by replacing problem water fixtures. The voluntary project pays for schools to test for lead and receive replacement equipment through a federal grant. The Bureau coordinates with public water systems to provide testing personnel to conduct testing, and provides informational and technical assistance. (page 13)