

PREVENT HARM

**Testimony of Emma Halas-O'Connor
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In SUPPORT of LD 1162, An Act to Ensure Safe Drinking Water for All Maine Families

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
April 21st, 2015**

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Emma Halas-O'Connor and I am here to testify on behalf of Prevent Harm in support of LD 1162, An Act to Ensure Safe Drinking Water for All Maine Families.

Prevent Harm is a nonprofit public health organization dedicated to protecting the health of Maine people from exposure to toxic chemicals, both in everyday products and throughout the home environment. Ten years ago, our sister organization the Environmental Health Strategy Center stood before this committee and supported legislation signed into law that established the lead poisoning prevention fund - that still generates resources to the Maine CDC for important education on preventing lead exposure. Now we're here today to address another public health threat that Maine residents face, one that is also completely preventable.

By one estimate, 150,000 rural Mainers are drinking unsafe levels of arsenic in their wells. I would like to thank Representative Gattine and his bipartisan co-sponsors for tackling this important effort to promote safe drinking water in Maine. LD 1162 would remove two key barriers for ensuring safe drinking water for all Maine families:

1. Lack of information about the need to test for arsenic and other common chemical contaminants in private well water
2. Lack of adequate access to affordable treatment for contaminated well water

LD 1162 would increase well testing through educational outreach and improved information

Given the testimony you are hearing today about the health effects of arsenic and the prevalence of arsenic and other toxic chemicals found in Maine well water, our goal in the state of Maine should be reaching universal testing of well water. The tragic fact is that only 45% of Maine residents with private wells currently test for arsenic and other toxic contaminants, leaving thousands of Mainers exposed.

The good news is that there is a proven strategy for getting more well water residents to test their wells - and it involves very simple outreach and education tactics like centralized communications to families with young children, personal contacts at the community level with

door to door education, reaching out to people in public spaces, and clear information on state health websites.¹

Right now there is a federal grant that is being used for outreach to a few hotspot communities in Maine, but that grant period will be up soon. We need an ongoing funding stream so that we can achieve significant changes in the rate of testing statewide. That's why LD 1162 would establish a Private Residential Safe Drinking Water fund housed under the Maine CDC, which would be used solely for the purpose of doing outreach and education to raise awareness among community members. The fund would be paid for through a small and reasonable fee of up to \$5 that a lab would collect along with payment for a water test. (A resident who purchases several well tests per year would only pay the \$5 fee one time.)

The bill would also simplify the Maine Public Health Laboratory website, to create a clear standard recommendation for chemicals that should be included in any water test. We know that all private wells in Maine have some probability of containing arsenic, uranium, radon, manganese, and other common contaminants – these are all chemicals that are harmful to human health.² Right now the website has too many combinations of tests for different chemical contaminants, and it is left to the consumer to navigate these choices.³ I have printed off the first 3 pages of the Maine CDC Water Testing Guide – there is room to simplify this website to provide one standard recommended test.

The bill also establishes reasonable roles for landlords, well drillers, and realtors to improve the rate of testing. Landlords would be required to disclose the results of recent water tests as would realtors, and well drillers would be required to ensure that there is a water test when a new well is drilled. We should take advantage of every new opportunity to get more wells tested.

Some may argue that most new home buyers do get an arsenic test: if that is true, then this requirement to test when a new well is drilled should not add any new burdens to the purchasing process. But because there is good data indicating that less than half of residents with private well water are getting a water test that includes arsenic and other toxic contaminants – we believe this requirement will ensure that all new homeowners get valuable information about the safety of their wells, and don't find out too late that their drinking water is unsafe.

LD 1162 would increase access to affordable water treatment for Maine families

Everyone deserves safe drinking water. But depending on the extent of contamination, water treatment can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars. Maine's child poverty rate is currently at 21%.⁴ Clearly not every family can afford to provide safe drinking

¹ Borsuk et al, Arsenic in Private Wells, Year 1 Final Report, Dartmouth Toxic Metals Superfund Research Program 3 October 2014, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~toxmetal/assets/pdf/Wellreport.pdf>

² Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Is Your Well Water Safe to Drink?" (Updated July 2012) <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/eohp/wells/documents/whattotest.pdf>

³ Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Public Health Services, "Water Testing Guide," (Accessed 4/20/2015), <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/guide.htm>

⁴ Kids Count Data Center, Children in Poverty (100 Percent Poverty) (2013) <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/43-children-in-poverty-100-percent-poverty?loc=1&loct=2#ranking/2/any/true/36/any/322>

water to their children, who we have heard are the most vulnerable population here when it comes to the safety of drinking water.

We need to ensure that people in rural regions of Maine who do find that their drinking water is contaminated are able to afford treatment to fix the problem. To do that, the bill would place a small surcharge not to exceed 3% on the purchase of a water treatment system. Those funds will be directed to the Maine State Housing Authority and will be used to assist eligible low-income families with children in purchasing water treatment systems.

This is not a problem that is going away on its own. We need to take proactive steps to ensure safe drinking water for all Maine families. We urge the Committee to vote ought to pass on LD 1162. Thank you for your consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions.