



"Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink".

So quoth the Ancient Mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epic poem. Are we better off than the elderly seaman? If we are, we're fortunate, for until recently little protection have many Americans had for their drinking water supply.

In some parts of the country, water running from kitchen sink faucets has been unfit to drink for a number of years.

In parts of Florida, salt water intrusion has so infiltrated the ground water that housewives need add no salt to vegetables they cook in tap water. People living there wouldn't dream of drinking a glass of it, making tea with it, or diluting concentrated fruit juice with it.

Potable water in those places must come from plastic bottles of water purchased at the supermarket for seventy or eighty cents a gallon. Similar situations exist in parts of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania -- in many small communities across the nation.

Times are changing, however, for on December 17, 1974, President Ford signed into law the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974.

Why is this law necessary? Since 1951 the average annual number of outbreaks of water-borne disease stopped falling, and studies show the number may be increasing since that time.

Just as air pollution control measures have been recognized as important, we must now accept the necessity of stricter regulations of water supplies to protect public health.

Who will be affected? All of us. Every state is mandated, beginning in December 1976, under regulations to be distributed in June 1975, to comply with the new federal regulations.

What are the regulations? Maximum contaminant levels permitted in public water supplies will be identified. Monitoring by local suppliers will be required. Criteria will be established for siting new drinking water treatment plants or developing new sources of supply. Local suppliers will be required to notify consumers if the water fails to meet the federal standards.

Who is responsible for enforcing these regulations? Responsibility will be shared among federal and state governments, and the individual local suppliers, with states taking the leading role.

National standards will be established by the Environmental Protection Agency; emergency powers are provided the EPA to take necessary enforcement action when an imminent and substantial danger to public health exists and appropriate state and local authorities have not acted.

The EPA administrator may impose a maximum civil penalty of \$5,000 per day for willful violations of the law.

Technical assistance and financial aid will be available for developing and implementing effective state programs.

States are required, under the law, to develop and implement water supply programs and to accept primary enforcement responsibility. It is the states' job to evaluate the programs of local suppliers.

Prior to this expansion of federal authority to regulate our water supplies, only interstate carrier conveyances, such as aircraft, are subject to federal regulation of water quality.

Now, any public water system providing piped water for human consumption, with fifteen or more service connections or regularly serving twenty-five individuals, will be subject to federal standards.

Is there really any danger now? As many as 5,000 small community systems are supplying potentially dangerous water to more than eight million people. These systems are the first target of the new law.

Altogether some 40,000 community water supply systems will be covered, and an additional 200,000 systems serving the traveling public (motels, restaurants, etc.) and such serving associations as schools and hospitals must meet the federal standards.

In conjunction with the passage of the law, the National Academy of Sciences is studying water-quality criteria and this study will become the basis for updating the federal regulations in September, 1977.

To protect the very young, the old and the infirm, the study will focus on effects of long-term exposure to specific contaminants and the synergistic effects of multiple contaminants.

Safety of water supplies has been one of the most neglected environmental problems for many years. With the enactment of the new Safe Drinking Water Act, and the implementation of appropriate state programs, a giant step will have been taken to assure pure, safe drinking water for everyone in this nation.

Costs? Yes, there will be costs. Costs in dollars -- instead of costs in sickness, pain and misery. These costs will be shared by all instead of being borne by the victims of illnesses contracted from impure drinking water.

Could these costs have been avoided? Unquestionably. But only if the local suppliers of drinking water had taken responsible action to insure safe and pure drinking water to consumers without the imposition of federal controls.

In some parts of the country local suppliers have taken responsible action, of course; in some parts of the nation safe, pure drinking water is already assured.

Even those places will experience higher costs when the new law is implemented, though; preparing monitoring reports for the state government takes time, and time represents money. The states will incur administrative costs in connection with the program; the salaries of administrators must be paid.

There is no question that it would have been less expensive for us all if the need for such a law had never arisen. It could all have been avoided if responsibilities had been met on the local level.

Over and over again we see illustrations of Big Government reaching down through the system to touch the lives and pocketbooks of individuals. Over and over, we complain of the octopus that federal government has become, creating more and more programs for which we must pay.

Still we refuse to take responsibility for meeting the needs on the local level. Still we delay action until federal law mandates controls on

ourselves.

Just one example is some long-range program for the reduction and prevention of crime. Statistics indicate that 75 per cent of serious crimes are committed by persons age 25 and under.

Many of the country's most dangerous criminals are children, 14 and 15-year-olds picked up for murder, rape and strong-armed robbery. Do we seek the reasons children are growing up to become criminals? Do we listen to judges, teachers, social workers who know that many budding criminals can be spotted easily in their early years?

It's tragedy that little or no official attention is given such children until they break the law, are caught and convicted. Unless the problem is attacked at its roots on a local level, it will become another instance of federal legislation to be paid for by us all.

We will have to pay, not only for the programs mandated, but also for administration at the state and federal levels, just as we now pay for the welfare system, and just as we will soon begin to pay for assuring safe and pure drinking water for everyone.