

## Water quality

# Utility wrestles with irrigation tie-ins

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If the local water utility is concerned about contamination from customers who use the public water supply for irrigation, it needs to close a loophole that allowed 500 connections that aren't controlled or inspected, customers told the utility's board at a hearing last week.

The Georgetown County Water and Sewer District is still looking for a solution to potential problems posed by "cross connections" to the water supply.

The district requires irrigation customers to install "backflow devices" to prevent water from sprinkler systems from running back into the water supply. But when that requirement took effect in 2000 there were about 500 customers with connections who weren't required to install the valves.

The district is concerned that about 10 percent of the 1,400 customers who do have backflow valves aren't getting them tested every year, as the district requires. The district staff has proposed assessing those customers \$5 a month and conducting its own inspections.

That could put Tom McGaughan, owner of Coastal Inspections, out of business.



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

**A set of valves at North Litchfield buffers the public water supply from an irrigation system.**

"I'm a damn good tester," he told the district board. "I take this job very seriously."

The backflow valves are also required for other connections to the water supply, such as fire sprinklers.

Brad Corkum, the district's operations director, said when customers with cross connections are sent annual notices telling them their backflow valves need to be tested about 90 percent

comply. However, he said that usually requires three notices for some customers.

"We need to have 100 percent compliance," Corkum said. "It only takes one incident to have a serious problem with the system."

He cited an estimate from the American Water Works Association that there are 100,000 incidents daily when water flows back into a public water supply.

The association estimates the failure rate for backflow valves at 12 percent.

Based on the association's figures, the district could have 120 failures each year, Corkum said.

The district is concerned that water from irrigation systems could contain pesticides, fertilizers or other contaminants.

"I don't object to the backflow protection program," said Tom Leis, a River Club resident. "I object to having to comply this way."

Leis told the district board that this was the first year he received a notice. He pays \$43 a year for testing and has a three-year contract.

"When I was asked to do something, I complied with it," Leis said.

Stephen Chmil of Willbrook Plantation told the board "I have never received a notice."

"This is one of the reasons we want to go to a new system," said Bill Schwartzkopf, who chairs the water district board.

"Maybe your system is not working," Chmil said. "Maybe you can tweak it a little."

Chmil, who pays \$55 a year for his inspections, said he likes the idea of getting competitive bids for the service. "This is what America is all about," he said.

Chmil and Leis both said the district should get tough with people who don't comply with the inspection requirement.

"I'm a little shocked you don't just say, 'hey, we'll cut your water off,'" Leis said.

McGaughan said he has inspected about 300 valves over the last five years. He said people don't understand the need, and don't understand why some people aren't required to have backflow devices.

"I have to become your representative," he told the board.

Corkum said the goal is to require the systems that existed before 2000 to have backflow valves and annual tests.

But the details will be worked out after the mandatory inspection policy is adopted.

McGaughan asked if the district has inspected its system to determine if there are cross connections that are off the books.

"There's no way to know," Corkum said.

"I know there's hundreds out there that haven't been inspected," McGaughan said, though he acknowledged he didn't know how many of those were grandfathered.

After listening to the public comments, the board asked staff to continue to refine a proposed policy.



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