

# Luzerne Co. Residents Find Contaminated Water Costly

UNIVERSITY PARK — The 1983-84 outbreak of waterborne giardiasis in Luzerne County, Pa., resulted in an average loss of \$433 per person in the areas affected, a recent study shows.

The study was conducted for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency by Resources for the Future, a private research foundation.

The Luzerne County outbreak affected 18 communities in an area between Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. Although 370 giardiasis cases were confirmed, 6,000 illnesses were estimated. About 75,000 residents were advised to

boil their water in late 1983, and one-third of the population affected remained under the advisory almost nine months.

The study measured both losses to the estimated 6,000 people who became ill and the costs people incurred trying to protect themselves from the disease. Losses from giardiasis included medical expenses as well as the value of lost work, productivity and leisure time. Cost of avoiding giardiasis — such as buying bottled water and boiling water for drinking and cooking — were even higher than the losses of those who actually became sick.

Businesses suffered significant economic losses, including higher costs resulting from reduced employee productivity and the need to provide safe water. Substantial resources were expended by government agencies and the water utility during the outbreak.

Pennsylvania has about 300 water supplies that use unfiltered surface water — more than any other state. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 1.7 million people served by these unfiltered supplies face a risk of contracting giardiasis.

As a result of the giardiasis

outbreak in Luzerne County and several other communities, public water supplies in Pennsylvania are being tested for the *Giardia* parasite. So far, the pathogen has been found in the water supplies of 21 communities, and more than 250,000 people have been advised to boil their water. As boil water advisories have been issued, many residents of these communities have taken actions to avoid giardiasis, such as boiling or buying water.

Filtering by the public water supplier is the best long-term way

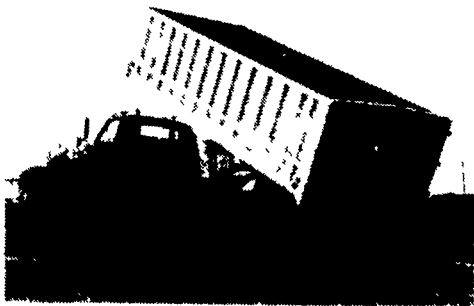
to ensure that surface water supplies are free of *Giardia*. Notes Dr. Charles Abdalla, assistant professor of agricultural economics, "Although this treatment is expensive, so is doing nothing about contaminated water — as demonstrated by the costs incurred during past outbreaks in Pennsylvania.

"Even though there have been no giardiasis outbreaks in the state since 1984," Dr. Abdalla continues, "contaminated water is creating significant costs for Pennsylvanians."

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