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# Free water testing: Don't let fear motivate purchase

There was more than enough toilet paper at Walmart in Punta Gorda when I was there Thursday afternoon preparing for Isaac. But not one gallon of water. Just five empty pallets.

We take water seriously.

So seriously that when Punta Gorda resident Jill Brown got a postcard in the mail recently, offering free water testing as part of a "statewide public awareness program," it triggered a bad memory.

When the Browns first moved here, they responded to such a free testing offer. After her husband — trained in environmental health — started asking technical questions, "It soon became clear that (the technician) didn't know what he was talking about and was only following a script," said Jill.

Joan Brown, business services manager at Charlotte County Utilities, confirms an increased number of customer phone calls regarding these companies.

"Some customers are asking if we are involved in the testing," said Brown. "For the most part, they are wondering if their water quality is OK, especially after a test by these companies."

Federal and state Safe Drinking Water Acts govern public drinking water systems, which serve about 80 percent of Florida residents, according to the Florida Department of Health. Utility companies, by law, must perform routine testing and provide testing results of its water content to the public. However, once in the home there can be sources of contamination.

And those with private wells are responsible for ensuring their own well water is safe to drink.

Dale Dixon, lab director at statecertified Benchmark EnviroAnalytical in Palmetto, said from a health standpoint there's really no reason to test public drinking water systems. However, a strong odor in the water may indicate concern for bacteria.

"Anything beyond that, what are you worried about?" said Dixon.

However, Dixon strongly recommends well water — especially wells with aerator systems — be tested for bacteria twice a year. Benchmark performs bacteria testing for \$30 at its North Port location. Call 941-625-3137.

National Testing Laboratories at [www. watercheck.com](http://www.watercheck.com) or 800-458-3330 also tests water.

Many companies throughout Florida are mailing similar-looking free testing offers. Pinellas County's Water & Sewer Division just cautioned its customers that "increased marketing efforts have been noted by companies that often use scare tactics and misrepresentation to sell a water treatment product."

CCU's Brown said the company plans to release a similar warning.

The Better Business Bureau has also issued warnings on a number of these companies because of a "pattern of complaints concerning high pressure and misleading sales practices."

Most of these in-home tests include high mineral content that causes hard water. Moderately hard water is common in Florida, as well as most American homes, and produces less sudsy soap water and water spotting. But it's not a health hazard.

"There does not appear to be any convincing evidence that water hardness causes adverse health effects in humans," notes the World Health Organization. "In contrast, the results of a number of studies have suggested that water hardness may protect against disease."

“Some people like hard water,” said Chris Tutsch at Aquaflow in Port Charlotte ([www. aquaflowwater.com](http://www.aquaflowwater.com)). “It’s a matter of personal preference.”

Tutsch said a number of confused customers called thinking the mailing came from the county.

Remember, there’s no free lunch. And that includes the water.

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David Morris

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