

Alamosa Outbreak Investigation Video Transcript
November 2009

RON

Hello. I am Ron Falco, the Safe Drinking Water Program Manager for the State of Colorado.

SHARON

And I am Sharon Williams, the Capacity Building Unit Manager within the Safe Drinking Water Program.

RON

We serve the citizens of Colorado working in the Water Quality Control Division of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Today we are going to discuss the waterborne disease outbreak of Salmonella that struck Alamosa, Colorado in March and April 2008. About 1,300 people got sick from drinking the city's water, and one person died.

Prior to the outbreak, Alamosa was one of about fifty community water systems in Colorado operating under a

waiver of state disinfection requirements granted many years earlier. Thus, so no water in the system was chlorinated.

SHARON

Salmonella outbreaks associated with public water systems are extremely rare. Thanks to statewide disease surveillance and communication, the salmonella outbreak in Alamosa was identified very quickly, within days of the first reported case.

Once State epidemiologists and water quality experts confirmed that the source of the outbreak was the City's drinking water supply, the emergency response was swift, effective, and well-coordinated with many other agencies.

RON

The public was notified that they should drink bottled water, and emergency responders established water distribution centers around the City.

Then, professional water utility crews and State samplers worked around the clock to thoroughly disinfect and flush the entire drinking water system.

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After the emergency response was over, the State Health Department conducted a comprehensive investigation into the cause of the outbreak. We believe that the salmonella contamination most likely originated with animal waste entering the city's ground-level water storage tank, called the Weber Reservoir. The reservoir was not regularly maintained and appeared to have been in poor condition for some time. The concrete structure of the Weber Reservoir was compromised with cracks and holes.

Un-chlorinated water in the Weber Reservoir could have been contaminated when animal waste was directly deposited in the reservoir by a small animal or bird.

It is also possible that the animal waste could have been carried into the reservoir by melting snow.

The investigation confirmed that physical, regulatory, and human infrastructure all failed in some way to protect the public's drinking water supply.

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Disease outbreaks related to drinking water can have tragic consequences.

Based on the lessons learned from this outbreak, the Safe Drinking Water Program in Colorado is implementing a variety of strategies to improve public health protection and prevent a similar outbreak from occurring in the future. For example, we are reviewing all public water systems in Colorado that have waivers from the disinfection requirement, and withdrawing those waivers when deemed appropriate. We are updating regulations, enhancing inspections of drinking water storage tanks, and offering more training and technical assistance to public drinking water systems. Our purpose is to provide compliance oversight and assistance services to public drinking water systems so

that they can always provide safe drinking water to the public.

Today, Alamosa's drinking water is safe thanks to improved operations and a new, advanced drinking water treatment facility.

SHARON

We hope that professionals in the drinking water community will learn from this event, as we have, so that waterborne disease outbreaks can be further reduced, and our responses to them if they do occur can be further improved.

For more detailed information, please read our event summary report, or full report located on our web page.

Thank you for spending some time with us to learn about this large waterborne disease outbreak, and thanks to the many agencies and volunteers who assisted with the response to this outbreak and the cause investigation.