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Petition to create West Ada Area of Drilling Concern denied by IDWR; New drilling rules will require seals to protect deep aquifer

BOISE - (Oct. 5, 2016) – A petition from the City of Meridian to create a West Ada Area of Drilling Concern has been denied by the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR), but IDWR will modify current well-construction permitting processes in the Meridian area to protect the deeper aquifers from contaminants, officials said. The City of Meridian provides drinking water to city residents from the deep aquifer.

In a preliminary order issued on Friday, Sept. 30, IDWR officials determined that formal designation of a West Ada Area of Drilling Concern was “premature,” said Tom Neace, manager of the ground water protection program for IDWR. Additional data and evaluation of the hydro-geologic conditions in the areas surrounding the proposed area of drilling concern will be necessary to establish defensible boundaries in the future, Neace said.

The City of Meridian petitioned IDWR to create the West Ada Area of Drilling Concern to protect the deep aquifer systems underlying Meridian and its municipal public water system from contamination. Some aquifers underlying the Meridian area, that are physically located above the deep aquifer system relied upon by Meridian for municipal water supplies, contain naturally occurring contaminants such as arsenic and uranium, as well as human caused contaminants like nitrates, pesticides and bacteria, IDWR officials said.

Recent and historic well-construction practices in the Meridian area have resulted in co-mingling of the shallow aquifers and spreading of contaminants, but more stringent enforcement of existing well construction rules, including sealing wells to production zones, will prevent potential spreading of contaminants from new well construction, Neace said.

“We want people to know that there are concerns about contaminants in the shallow aquifer, and there’s an intermediate zone that contains naturally occurring uranium and arsenic. We don’t want people drilling in that layer to inadvertently spread those contaminants,” Neace said. “By requiring the placement of well seals consistent with existing rules, we feel the municipal water supply obtained from the deep aquifer will be protected.”

Effective Nov. 1, 2016, long-form permit applications will be required for all wells in the proposed West Ada Area of Drilling Concern area (see map). A prospectus will be required for all wells prior to drilling to show all pertinent construction and sealing details. Newly drilled domestic wells will be limited to less than 200 feet of depth with appropriate well seals to prevent comingling of aquifers. All wells deeper than 200 feet below ground surface will require a full length pumped grout seal from the production zone to the surface as currently required by the Rules. Well screens will be limited to 20 feet in length to prevent cross contamination between aquifers.

Well users within the area of concern identified by Meridian, who are concerned about their water quality can have their water tested to ensure the quality of the water is safe for public consumption.

The Preliminary Order and other related documents can found at: <https://idwr.idaho.gov/files/legal/orders/20160930-Preliminary-Order-Regarding-West-Ada-Area-of-Drilling-Concern.pdf>. You can also contact Tom Neace at 208-287-4935 for additional information.

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