

Local officials feel fortunate for drinking water sources

By Seth Boster, Star Staff Writer, sboster@annistonstar.com | Posted: Tuesday, February 9, 2016 6:54 pm

The grounds that provide drinking water to homes in the area are sacred, according to those who oversee them.

Ed Turner, general manager for the Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board, stood on a bridge Tuesday overlooking Coldwater Springs, the vast, clear pool that rises naturally from underground, up through rocks and soil. That water beneath the surface is pumped and processed through the adjacent Krebs Water Treatment Plant, the gated site among the trees on the side of Alabama 202. Some 16,500 homes throughout Anniston, Oxford and Calhoun County get their water from that unseen source.

“You can’t be any more fortunate to have that,” Turner said of the groundwater. “That’s from God.”

Earlier in the day at Germania Springs, Jacksonville’s primary source for drinking water, Chris Patterson pointed to bubbles rising to the surface of a stream beside the gated treatment plant near Alabama 21 — signs, he said, of the reservoir below that serves 5,500 homes.

“We have it coming up literally through the earth,” said Patterson, the city’s water plant manager. “That’s one of the best protections you can have, for it to be filtered naturally, the way God intended it.”

When explaining why they don’t expect here the sort of water contamination crisis that recently struck Flint, Mich., Patterson and Turner start by praising these groundwater sources. Coldwater Springs and Germania Springs are fundamentally different from the Flint River, the surface water source that proved to be highly corrosive, causing dangerous levels of lead in distribution pipes to leach into water. According to a class-action lawsuit, Michigan’s Department of Environmental Quality wasn’t treating the river water with an anti-corrosive agent — necessary, experts said, for the river to be a safe drinking source.



Making it safe

Chris Patterson, the city’s water plant manager, stands beside a pool at the Germania Springs water pumping station in Jacksonville.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 32 percent of the country's people — mostly in rural communities, the agency notes — are served by groundwater sources, like Coldwater Springs and Germania Springs. The other 68 percent gets their drinking water from systems that use surface water, like the Coosa River, which serves Gadsden and surrounding municipalities.

Coosa Riverkeeper Frank Chitwood said in a phone call Tuesday that pH levels, or measurements of acidity, were “a major problem” on the river.

“I know that a big issue for utilities that pull their source water from the river is the quality of the river itself,” Chitwood said.

It is the task of water treatment plants to ensure pH levels are at a level safe for drinking distribution. While treatment varies depending on the quality of the source, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that surface water, due to its heavier pollution, typically requires more treatment than groundwater.

“We're more protected than surface water from the get-go,” Patterson said beside Germania Springs. “Groundwater is more pure than surface water.”

Like in Jacksonville, chlorine and fluoride is added to fight any bacteria in water pumped at the Krebs Treatment Plant at Coldwater, which last year received awards for its quality of operation from the Alabama Department of Environment Management as well as the Alabama Water and Pollution Control Association. At Germania and Coldwater springs, filters remove any clumps of dirt or moss particles. Operators frequently check pH levels.

Turner and Patterson said the process ensures the water's non-corrosiveness by the time it is distributed out into household pipes, some of them made of iron, some of them lead. Every three years, the Environmental Protection Agency requires public water systems to submit drinking water samples for lab tests checking for lead and copper exposure.

“If any good can come out of this,” Turner said of the Flint crisis, “it's people being made more aware of safe drinking water. Sometimes it takes a negative thing to bring awareness. We're fortunate we don't have that situation here.”



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Hunter Dickerson, an operator, checks out the facility at the Coldwater Springs water pumping station in Anniston.