

Testimony of Sarah Woodbury, Director of Advocacy, Defend Our Health
In Support of LD 1891, “An Act To Continue Supporting Safe Drinking Water for Maine Families”
Before the Labor and Housing Committee
February 2, 2022

Good morning, Senator Daughtry, Representative Sylvester and members of the Labor and Housing Committee. My name is Sarah Woodbury. I am the director of advocacy for Defend Our Health. Defend Our Health’s mission is to make sure that everyone has equal access to safe food and drinking water, healthy homes and products that are toxic-free and climate friendly. I am here to testify in support of LD 1891, “An Act To Continue Supporting Safe Drinking Water for Maine Families”.

Making sure that all Mainers, regardless of income, have access to safe drinking water is one of the core missions of Defend Our Health. We are proud to have worked on legislation over the years that has strengthened safe drinking water protections, including legislation in 2017 that provided funding to the well water abatement program, which helps low-income families install filtration systems on wells that tested positive for high levels of arsenic and other contaminants.

A higher proportion of Mainers get their water from wells than any other state in the nation. Due to Maine’s unique geology, there are areas with high levels of naturally occurring arsenic and other contaminants including manganese, uranium, and radon. At least 1 in 10 Maine wells have unsafe drinking water based on federal drinking water standards. While each contaminant has negative health effects, due to the frequency in which it is found, arsenic is of particular concern. The toxic metal is strongly associated with a whole host of health issues including bladder, skin, and lung cancer. Maine’s bladder cancer rate is 20% higher than the rest of the nation.¹ Like its cousin lead, arsenic also harms children’s brains. A 2014 study in Maine showed that children with even moderate levels of arsenic in their drinking water had a decline of average IQ scores, 5 to 6 points lower than their peers drinking clean water.²

Approximately 70,000 Mainers live below the federal poverty level. For Mainers that are living paycheck to paycheck, paying for testing and remediation of their well water may be cost prohibitive. Unlike those on public systems, the over 50% of Maine families who use residential wells for their water are completely exempt from federal Safe Drinking Water Act protections and mandatory testing which people on public water supplies don’t have to think about. The

¹ Baris, D., et al. (2016). “Elevated bladder cancer in Northern New England: The role of drinking water and arsenic.” *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. 2016 May: 108(9).
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5939854/>

² Wasserman, G., et al.. (2014) “A cross-sectional study of well Water arsenic and child IQ in Maine schoolchildren.” *Environmental Health*. 2014:13.
<https://ehjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1476-069X-13-23>



disproportionately rural and lower-income communities are left to pay for testing and treatment of their drinking water as well as face the health and financial impacts of exposure to arsenic and other contaminants in drinking water. While public systems do operate largely from rates, many receive substantial tax funding, including billions from the recent federal infrastructure bill. Residential well users will not benefit from this funding.

In 2017, Defend worked with legislators on both sides of the aisle to provide \$500,000 to fund a program under the Maine Housing Authority (MHA) that provides funding to low income Mainers to help remediate contaminated wells. If a well tests high for contaminants, the owner can reach out to MHA to request funding for remediation. Remediation can cost thousands of dollars so a program like this is invaluable to those who qualify.

Because of the success of the program, the funding that was designated for the program in 2017 is running low. According to MHA, since the implementation, 662 households have benefitted from the program. Even more could be helped if we provide more funding to this program to make sure that everyone who needs help can apply for funds.

Safe drinking water is a basic human right. Access to drinking water should not depend on your income or where you live. Low-income communities, tribes, rural communities and communities of color are disproportionately impacted and more susceptible to health impacts and financial impacts of exposure to arsenic and other contaminants in drinking water. It is important that we do everything we can to make sure that all families have access to safe drinking water. Therefore, we urge you to vote unanimously ought to pass on LD 1891.