

Grants To Counties Program Explanation of Funds Available

February, 2016

In 1987 the Iowa Legislature passed the Groundwater Protection Act. That legislation contained many provisions to safeguard and study the water supply system in Iowa. Money was collected by a tax on fertilizer and pesticides with the money divided up among a number of different projects and agencies.

The county environmental health departments of each county in Iowa were allocated a certain portion of this fund. A county had to meet basic standards of enforcing well and septic regulations of the State and county in order to receive this money. The money was designated for three purposes: (1) testing of private wells, (2) plugging of abandoned wells, and (3) renovation of existing wells to modern construction standards.

Any citizen of Iowa can access these funds and programs if your county participates. Most counties in the State do, including Guthrie County. Each county operates the program in slightly different ways but all are governed by a set of State rules that have to be followed. In Guthrie County we have chosen to keep this program as simple and paperwork free as possible.

Funding is received on a July 1 – June 30 fiscal year. The amount of funding available on a yearly basis fluctuates but is normally in the \$15,000 to \$25,000 range. There are some years when we do run out of funds as we approach that June 30 date. One never knows when the Legislature might choose to change this law. So it would be wise to take advantage of this program as early as possible in the fiscal year and now rather than some later year. Even if it's in that May to June time frame, contact this office as in most years we will still have funding, especially for water testing.

Water Testing

This department offers inexpensive water testing for bacteria and nitrates for any private well. Any owner or tenant may contact this office to have such a water test done. Samples are collected Monday through Thursday and submitted to the State Hygienic Lab (SHL) in Iowa City. Results come back within about one week.

The cost of the test is \$25.00 and three tests are conducted. Total coliform bacteria and fecal coliform bacteria are tested for as well as nitrates. These are the common parameters people are most interested in. We also check the condition of your well and are available to give you information that can help you improve a poorly constructed well.

To have such a test conducted just contact this office and a staff person will arrange to collect the sample within a couple of days. Do NOT bring samples to this office. We need to collect the samples in special sterile containers and we also need to

look at the well as part of this State program, which is aimed at collecting general information on the conditions of wells in Iowa.

There is no obligation to repair any problems. If a test comes back unsafe, this department does NOT require any repairs, condemn the well, etc. This is strictly information for you to use as you wish.

Well Plugging

Funds are also available to help with the cost of properly filling abandoned wells. Any unused well in Iowa that doesn't meet current well standards is considered abandoned and subject to being required to be plugged. Obviously, there are tens of thousands of such wells. This program provides an incentive by giving the property owner partial payment for eliminating this well.

The procedures for filling a well are simple. It involves compacted fill materials such as sand or limestone rock and a sealing material called bentonite clay. There are regulations specifying how this is done but it is not a complicated process and, in most cases, is not overly costly.

Of primary importance is for you to realize that no well can be plugged in Guthrie County without a staff person from this Dept. present to see that the work is properly done. This is true whether the cost share money is accepted or not. We are normally available on a one to two day notice to do this so that there is no long inconvenient wait.

The County will reimburse an owner 100% of the cost of the well plugging with a maximum payment of \$500.00 for each well (or cistern - \$300.00) that is filled. There is no application process to fill out and no financial information sought. All that is required is to submit a copy of the bill for the work upon completion. A check for the eligible amount will be sent from the County within 2-6 weeks. The State also provides money for filling old cisterns. These are more of a safety hazard rather than a groundwater hazard. The cost share for filling cisterns is 100% of the cost with a \$300.00 maximum payment.

Anyone interested in this program should contact us by phone, mail, email, or in person. We'll work promptly with you to get this completed. We are available to look at the well and even measure the depth and diameter if you are unable to do that. Depth and diameter determine how much material is needed.

Well Renovation

Funds can be used to convert an old, improperly constructed well into a well that meets current code for well standards. Some wells, such as drilled wells in pits, can be brought up to current code relatively easily and cheaply. Large diameter cement tile wells are also not too costly to bring up to new standards.

Certain wells are not eligible for renovating. Wells located in hazardous locations may not be eligible. Wells that are brick, stone, or wood (few of these left anymore) are

NOT eligible for financing. The State views these as too poor quality to spend the money on. Wells with extremely high water tables (less than 10' from the surface to the water) are also not eligible. Such wells are really relying on surface water, which is not a safe source.

The procedure for different styles of wells is different. We can explain how any particular well would be renovated, or explain why it cannot be done. Well renovation has to be completed by a contractor that is certified through the State to do this work. Our office has a list of people who have passed this State requirement.

The County will reimburse an owner 100% of the cost of the well renovation with a maximum payment of \$1,000.00 for each well that is renovated. Again there is no application process but the certified contractor must get approval from this office BEFORE the work is done and we will check the work in progress to be sure it is done properly. Payment is then sent approximately 2-6 weeks after we receive a copy of the bill for the work.

Since beginning this program in about 1989, hundreds of wells have been tested and hundreds of wells have been plugged. Testing is, of course, an on-going process as private wells are recommended to be tested about once per year. Although a lot of wells have been plugged, there are still hundreds of abandoned wells in the County and more are abandoned each year for various reasons. Although a number of wells have been renovated, this is an underutilized program that more people could take advantage of.