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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Water, Food Precautions after the Flood**

The Somerset County Health Officers Association wants residents who have been affected by the flood to be aware of safety measures when it comes to food and water.

For flood-related information, residents should contact their **local health departments**. A listing of Somerset County's 21 municipalities and information relating to each town may be found on the county Web site at [www.co.somerset.nj.us](http://www.co.somerset.nj.us) by selecting "Municipalities" from the menu on the left of the home page.

Residents also may obtain storm information on the county Web site under the section titled "Storm Information."

Following is information relating to water and food safety after the flood:

Health risks can persist long after the immediate danger from flood waters has passed. Flooding can affect food and water supplies, and presents special health risks and requires extra attention for owners of private wells and septic systems.

**Food Safety:** Food may not be safe to eat during and after an emergency. The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services or your local health department can make specific recommendations regarding the safety of food subject to possible spoilage due to a natural disaster or power outage.

#### ***Identify and throw away food that may not be safe to eat***

- Throw away food that may have come in contact with flood or storm water.
- Throw away food that has an unusual odor, color, or texture.
- Throw away perishable foods (including meat, poultry, fish, eggs and leftovers) that have been above 40 degrees Fahrenheit for two hours or more.
- Throw away canned foods that are bulging, opened, or damaged.
- Thawed food that contains ice crystals or is 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below can be refrozen or cooked.
- Food containers with screw caps, snap lids, crimped caps (soda pop bottles), twist caps, flip tops, snap open, and home canned foods should be discarded if they have come into contact with flood water because they cannot be disinfected.
- If cans have come in contact with flood water or storm water, remove the labels, wash the cans, and dip them in a solution of one cup of bleach in five gallons of water. Re-label the cans with a marker.
- Do not use affected water to wash dishes, brush teeth, wash and prepare food, wash hands and make ice or baby formula.

#### ***Store food safely:***

- While the power is out, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.
- Add block ice or dry ice to your refrigerator if the electricity is expected to be off longer than four hours. Wear heavy gloves when handling ice.

#### ***Handle food safely:***

- If no water is available for hand washing, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

If your refrigerator or freezer was not exposed to flood waters, you may be able to salvage part or all of its contents. Food in a fairly full freezer can be kept safe for up to two days without power if the door is unopened. Check carefully for any signs of spoilage. If meat, poultry, fish or shellfish have been partially or completely thawed, they should **not be refrozen**. Fruits and vegetables that are still firm to the touch can be refrozen. Any foods that have been at room temperature for more than two hours or have an unusual odor, color, or texture should be discarded. A good rule of thumb is **"When in Doubt - Throw It Out."**

If flood waters seeped into your refrigerator or freezer, the unit will need to be disinfected before using it again. Remove the shelving, crispers and ice trays and wash them with hot, soapy water. Rinse with a solution of a half-cup bleach per gallon of water. Wash the entire interior and exterior of the refrigeration unit, including the door and gaskets, with hot water and baking soda. Rinse with the bleach solution, leaving the door open for fifteen minutes to dry out the interior. If the refrigerator or freezer still has a "flood" odor after cleaning, the interior can be washed using a solution of one teaspoon of baking soda per gallon of water. A solution of one cup of vinegar or ammonia per gallon of water also can be used (never mix ammonia and bleach),

The U.S. Department of Agriculture operates a food safety hotline staffed by professional home economists to answer questions about the safety of your food during a flood. Call 1-800-535-4555, Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

***Drinking Water Safety for Well Owners:*** If your well has been flooded, you need to disinfect it to protect your family's health. Flood waters carry bacteria, viruses and parasites, as well as chemicals. Water from such wells should be considered NOT SAFE FOR DRINKING until proven otherwise by a certified laboratory. Also, sediment that enters your well during flooding can cause problems for the pump and plumbing systems. Bacteria that cause a rotten-egg smell and stain plumbing fixtures also may be introduced during flooding.

**If your well was impacted by the recent flooding or heavy rainfall:**

- ❑ Do not turn on the well pump until inspected by an electrician or well contractor. There is a danger of electrical shock and damage to your well or pump if it was flooded.
- ❑ If you suspect your well water supply was affected, drink only commercially bottled, boiled or treated water until your water supply is tested and found safe. This also applies to brushing your teeth, washing food or preparing ice.
- ❑ Do not use your well water to prepare food, unless it will be cooked or brought to a rolling boil for at least one minute. Do not use it to manually wash dishes. It is safe to wash clothes and to use a dishwasher with a rinse cycle that exceeds 122 degrees Fahrenheit.
- ❑ Boiling water, when practical, is the preferred way to kill harmful bacteria and parasites. Bringing water to a rolling boil for one minute will kill most organisms.
- ❑ Contact your local health department and/or a well professional for specific advice regarding the procedures to disinfect your well water system. General guidelines are available at the Somerset County Health Department website: <http://www.co.somerset.nj.us/health/index.htm> (under "Flood Information")
- ❑ Test your water regularly. Because of the extent of flood damage, your well may have bacteria or chemicals for many months after the flood. Waste water from malfunctioning septic tanks or chemicals seeping into the ground can affect groundwater even after it has been found to be safe.

***Septic Tanks and Flooding:*** Septic tanks should not be pumped during periods of high water tables or flooding. If a septic tank is pumped, it may "float" up due to hydrostatic pressure from groundwater. This may cause damage to the pipe connections to the septic tank system. If your septic system is not working, you should use a portable toilet system or public facilities, if feasible. The septic system's drain field needs time to dry out and become functional again. Also, septic lines may have broken during the flood.

**Concerns and Advisories:** For more information on home water treatment and water testing, phone the EPA's **Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791** or your local health department.

If you observe chemical containers (including barrels and drums) that have moved to your property, call the **NJDEP Environmental Hotline**, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, at **1-877-WARN-DEP**.

For further information, contact your **town's health officer**.