Feeling the Fear

T he year started off with big news in the water treatment industry. The chemical spill in West Virginia, which affected more than 300,000 people, topped national headlines for weeks in January. The “do not use” advisory lasted more than a week for portions of that population, forcing them to rely on bottled water for drinking, cooking and bathing for up to 10 days. While chemical spills and advisories of this magnitude are infrequent, the event certainly led consumers across the country to question their tap water—and wonder if any potentially harmful contaminants may be lurking in it.

West Virginia residents were still uncertain about the safety of their tap water even after given the “all clear” to use it—due in no small part, it seems, to West Virginia American Water advising pregnant women to continue avoiding tap water until the chemical tested at undetectable levels. “If they’re saying that they don’t want pregnant ladies to drink the water, hey, I’m not going to drink it,” said West Virginia resident Larence Armstrong in a CNN.com article.

Although the West Virginia spill is an extreme case, it is clear that many Americans have fears about their tap water. Taste and odor are among the most common concerns, but news stories about drinking water advisories and emerging contaminants fuel fears about more dangerous issues. David Noble points out in his article, “Trouble at the Tap” (page 8), that this is only compounded by the fact that many municipal water treatment plants are not equipped to remove many of the newest contaminants that have been discovered.

Many Americans—44%, according to a recent NSF Intl. consumer survey—use water filters in their homes to combat these issues. The survey also revealed, however, that many people know relatively little about what their filters are actually capable of removing from water and what contaminants are actually present in their tap water—approximately 35% of those surveyed were just using a filtration system that was already installed in the home when they moved in. Anecdotally, of course, I could tell dozens of stories detailing misunderstandings about the capabilities of residential water filters. And in a case like the West Virginia chemical spill, those filters would have been no help at all.

The issues here are complicated, which means there are no easy answers. In a country as large and varied as the U.S., with water quality and conditions just as diverse as its people, there is no “one-size-fits-all” answer on how to educate consumers about potential tap water issues and their solutions. Organizations like the Water Quality Assn. have made many strides in helping to promote knowledge about water treatment issues, most recently releasing a “Water Treatment for Dummies” booklet for consumers, free of charge (the booklet is available in digital format at www.wqa.org).

When it comes to educating consumers on the specifics of local water quality, however, the dealers are where it’s at. From testing a home’s water to recommending treatment options, there are a multitude of opportunities to help customers learn about what is going on at their taps. Take the time to educate them—the more everyone knows about water quality, the safer and healthier we will be.