Charlotte County takes 1st place in drinking water competition

Many utilities get water from Peace River, 7 contestants judged

By BETSY CALVERT  
Staff Writer

Confession of a water judge: They all tasted pretty good.

But Charlotte County Utilities took home the honor of best tasting, best looking and best smelling water out of seven contestants in the region.

It was part of the annual competition of region 10 of the Florida Section American Water Works Association held Thursday at the county’s East Port Campus.

The winner goes on to the state competition in Tampa next month, followed by a national competition in Denver in June.

An eighth local contestant, Gasparilla Utilities, arrived after the start of the contest, and organizers reluctantly declined its entry.

I would have accepted an eighth cup of water, but rules are rules. As a Sun reporter, I was asked to be one of four judges this year.

Other judges were: Charlotte County Commissioner Joe Tiseo, Florida SouthWestern Collegiate High School student Samantha Kipfinger, and ecologist Ross Morton of Southwest Florida Water Management District.

We judged based on expert re-taste.

The ranking of the remaining six contestants is not something they told us. I am relieved by that, because frankly, the differences between the waters was small to non-existent. Also, I don’t know which I rated the best.

We judges were asked to evaluate the color, smell, clarity and finally, the taste of each cup of water, and give it a rating — not a ranking — of one to five with five being the best. I struggled to go below a four on any category for any contestant.

That means for all the waters, they were either pretty good or very good. There was no smell to any of the contestants. As for color, I have a nagging suspicion that the color depends a lot on where the overhead light bulbs are located above the judge. I had to let go of that.

Before the contest, I asked how many contestants get most of their water from contestant number one: the Peace River Regional Water Supply Authority — which won best in state in 2013. Answer: three or four at any time. But everyone has a different distribution system, and everyone blends in some other water, usually from an underground aquifer or Shell Creek. Bottom line: beware of annoying questions from reporters invited to be judges.

For those using the regional authority water, that means the main source of their water comes from the sea-colored, tannin rich waters of the Peace River.

When I asked the winner, Charlotte County Utilities superintendent Steve Kipfinger how they control their taste, he deferred to the master of the regional authority, Operations Supervisor Mike Chell.

Chell said no one would want to drink the water when they first scoop it out of the river. The color is dark. It is rich in organic materials from the wild Florida shoreline.

“If you looked at it, you’d say, there’s no way that’s going to be drinking water,” said Chell.

First, he said, they add aluminum sulfate to pull the color and turbidity. Then they fix the acidity of the water or pH with caustic soda. Then they add powdered activated carbon for taste and odor control. Finally, they add chlorine and ammonia for disinfection.

As time and distance passes, the taste of these chemicals waxes and wanes.

The utilities that receive this treated water blend it with small amounts of other source waters.

“The secret is in the blending,” Chell said. “It’s tricky, tricky business.”

What did I learn?

They test the water for safety 800 times a day. They test the water for taste at least three times a day. Operators have become unpretentious water sommeliers, detecting subtle changes in the daily drinking water experience. And because they know what causes those changes, they can make adjustments. Their goal seems to be making sure the water looks good, smells good, and doesn’t have too much or too little taste.

That means water utility operators in these parts take their job seriously.

Email: betsy.calvert@yoursun.com