

# RESPONDING TO WATER CONTAMINATION EVENTS: COMMUNICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract.** The potential for terrorism, including intentional contamination of public water supplies, is on the forefront of public health preparedness planning. When known or unknown contaminants get into a municipal water supply, the response is multi-jurisdictional and requires good communication between water professionals, first responders and local, state, and federal authorities. For most water suppliers, this is new territory, and the scale and scope of response activities can quickly seem to get “out of hand.” This panel discussion will feature representatives from multiple agencies working through a tabletop exercise of a “real” event in Georgia. Audience members will be encouraged to participate in the discussion of issues and gaps in response activities to a potential terrorist act against a municipal water supply.

## Panel Organizer and Moderator:

- Dana Cole, Notifiable Disease Epidemiology Section, GA Division of Public Health

## Panel Participants:

- Julia McPeck, Environmental Health Section, GA Division of Public Health
- Kevin Caspary, Emergency Preparedness Branch, GA Division of Public Health
- Betsy Kagey, Chronic Disease, Injury, and Environmental Health Epidemiology Section, GA Division of Public Health
- Amy Rammo, Environmental Protection Division, GA Department of Natural Resources
- Charles Williams, Environmental Protection Division, GA Department of Natural Resources
- Van Harris, Consumer Protection Division, GA Department of Agriculture

## EVENT DESCRIPTION

Early Friday morning, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the morning operator at a municipal water plant (2.1 MGD capacity, 0.6 MGD average daily production) noted evidence of a break-in at the plant and a foreign granular substance in the troughs between the sedimentation basins and the filters. The plant had not been operational during the night, and the breach in plant security likely took place in the night. The morning operator immediately shut down the plant and called local law enforcement.

## Tabletop Objectives

During this panel discussion the following issues will be covered:

1. Threat Assessment to determine risk following a water contamination event
2. Multi-agency communication and response:
  - a. Public Health
  - b. Consumer Protection
  - c. Environmental Protection
  - d. Chemical and Biologic Laboratories
  - e. Federal Partners
3. Communicating with the public
4. Common issues and gaps that occur during a response to an unknown contaminant in a public water supply