

For 4th-graders, water story was fishy

By Frank X. Mullen Jr.
fmullen@rgj.com

THE CLAIM

Reno-Sparks has the fifth-worst drinking water in the nation.

THE BACKGROUND

When teacher Doug Heim's fourth-grade class at Bailey Charter Elementary School in Reno read on the Internet last month that Reno-Sparks has the fifth-worst drinking water in the U.S., the students were horrified.

"I saw wide eyes, shock and fear," Heim said. "The article said the water that they drank every day was really dangerous. I thought that this might be a teachable moment."

The article was briefly available Jan. 31 on the RGJ.com and on many media sites and blogs. RGJ editors removed the Associated Press story within hours, and it did not appear in the print edition. But versions of the "worst tap water" articles remain on many sites, including those of newspapers, TV news stations and blogs.

The class investigated the claim that our tap water is a toxic "chemical cocktail." They researched water quality testing methods and read reports from the Truckee Meadows Water Authority. They traced the source of the story to the Washington-based Environmental Working Group, which released the study in December 2009.

"Our class didn't like that you printed this article without researching it," the students wrote to the RGJ. "We would have liked to have seen the evidence that our water is so bad. You didn't even list the dangerous chemicals! We simply Googled this, and found that this report just isn't true. We also found that the Environmental Working Group tested well water before it was treated. Your article scared us for no good reason. The next



HANDOUT

Doug Heim's fourth-grade class at Bailey Charter Elementary School in Reno

time you copy an article from another source, please make sure to check your facts."

The newspaper had removed the AP story from RGJ.com on Jan. 31 for the very reasons later cited by the students. The original report had been disputed by sources in RGJ stories in 2009 and last year. This year, the wire service had picked up the story from the Las Vegas Sun, which got its information from AOL Finance, an online blog. AOL Finance published the material last month.

TMWA officials in April and in August sent the Environmental Working Group a two-page letter objecting to the "erroneous and distorted data" used for the report and said the information was "irresponsible, incorrect and misleading." The utility listed rebuttals to the group's findings and shared water quality data.

"(The fourth-graders) did the right thing," said Paul Miller, manager of water quality and operations for TMWA. "If you have

concerns, do some research or give us a call. With all the stuff on the Internet, you have to sort out fact from fiction and be aware of people's agendas."

Leeann Brown, press secretary for the Environmental Working Group, said the organization has received updated and corrected information from Reno and several of the 100 cities listed in the report. She noted that utilities had six weeks to submit corrected data before the

report was made public in 2009, but many did not do so until after the report was released.

"We are currently diving back into the data from utilities and will make dated revisions as necessary once our analysis is complete," she said. She said it's possible the city rankings will be revised.

The website now states that updates to the 2009 report are pending. It also notes that the group is in favor of stricter water quality standards and that

current federal standards for tap water (which TMWA meets) are no guarantee of safety.

Heim said his pupils still drink the water.

"They learned that just because something is on the Internet doesn't mean it's true," he said.

And the 16 young fact-checkers learned that one-sided stories, incomplete data or misinformation can zip around the globe before the truth can even turn on its laptop. And that old news can become new again at the press of an "enter" key thousands of miles away.

THE VERDICT

While the Environmental Working Group might be correct that the nation needs better water quality standards, its 2009 report has several errors relating to the Truckee Meadows Water Authority's data on water quality. The report is misleading in that it implies tap water is unsafe when some of the data applies to untreated well water.

The claim that Reno-Sparks has "the fifth-worst water" in the nation is not supportable.



ASK FACT CHECKER

Frank X. Mullen Jr. is a senior reporter for the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Fact Checker is our weekly analysis on whether the facts and figures being floated in the media are true.

Have something that you think we need to get to the bottom of? E-mail us at factchecker@rgj.com or call Kelly Ann Scott at 775-327-6785.

