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Potable Water Interruptions

Question

May a food service operation continue in operation if its supply of potable water is interrupted?

Discussion

A sufficient supply of potable water is necessary in a food service operation for handwashing, food preparation, equipment cleaning and sanitizing, and other food service activities. Problems involving the water supply (including ice) is especially important since water may serve as a direct vehicle of contamination to food or food contact surfaces.

This information discusses the factors that should be considered and the alternatives available in deciding what action is necessary to protect the public health in the event the supply of potable water to a food service operation is interrupted. Whether a food service operation is served by a community or noncommunity water supply, anticipated and unanticipated interruptions in the supply of potable water can occur. Anticipated interruptions include routine or scheduled maintenance on the pump or plumbing, or, less commonly, the diversion of the water during certain hours each day due to rationing. Unanticipated interruptions include plumbing failure, fire department demands, supply contamination or system failure due to accidents or natural disasters. Many are in no way the fault of the operator. In the event of an emergency, which could result in the contamination of food, including an unexpected interruption in the water supply, it is necessary to protect the public health and to promptly notify the local health department.

There are two alternative courses of action which, under certain circumstances, could be accepted by the local health department. These alternatives are related to the operations dependency on water (e.g. menu and nature of the operation), the anticipated duration of the water interruption, any advance contingency planning, and the ready availability of alternate supplies of potable water, single service tableware/single use kitchenware and other resources.

These alternatives are:

1. Temporarily ceasing operations; or
2. Obtaining a temporary supply of potable water from:
 - a) Individual serving size containers of commercially bottled water,
 - b) Piping, tubing or hoses connected to an adjacent approved source,
 - c) Bulk water containers filled from an approved source, a water/food tank truck filled with water from an approved source.

To be acceptable, an alternative supply must be protected from contamination and must provide enough water to accommodate the public health related operations of the food service. In addition, bulk containers, tank trucks or water tanks used for transporting or storing potable water must be cleaned, sanitized and filled in an acceptable manner.

Water supply interruptions need to be examined on a case by case basis with particular attention given to the public health implications in order to decide if the temporary source of supply is safe and sufficient. Some of the food service operation's activities, which should be evaluated along with some optional procedures, which may be considered and authorized by the local health department, are as follows:

1. Thawing of frozen foods
 - Thaw only in refrigerator or as part of the cooking process.
2. Washing of produce
 - Obtain and use prewashed packaged produce.
 - Use produce washed prior to interruption
 - Use frozen/canned produce.

- Wash fresh produce with potable water from an alternative approved source.
3. Spraying, dipping and soaking of produce
 - Use potable water from an alternative source.
 4. Preparing and cooking food, including reconstituting or dried foods
 - Use only food that was prepared prior to interruption.
 - Discontinue sale of prepared foods.
 - Use prepared food from an alternate approved source (i.e., local deli)
 - Use water from an alternative approved source.
 - Use ice prepared before interruption.
 - Use no ice in preparing/serving beverages.
 - Purchase packaged potable ice.
 5. Preparing carbonated and other cold/hot beverages
 - Replace with bottled or canned beverages.
 - Use potable water from an alternative source.
 6. Handwashing by employees
 - Use potable water from an alternative source.
 - (Any alternative accepted for employee handwashing must accommodate regular and effective handwashing by employees.
 7. Cleaning and sanitizing of tableware, kitchenware, vending machine components, equipment and surfaces
 - Use only single-service tableware and single use kitchenware.
 - Use alternative water source.
 - Take components to commissary for cleaning.
 - Use waterless cleaning or nonpotable water for floors, garbage cans, etc.
 8. Storing of dispensing utensils in dipper wells
 - Store utensils in food.
 9. Using garbage grinders
 - Dispose of garbage in proper containers together with the other refuse.
 10. Flushing of employee toilets
 - Use adjacent approved facilities, which are readily available.
 - Utilize waterless toilets (“portajohns”).
 - Use nonpotable water.
 11. Flushing of customer toilets and lavatories
 - Close these facilities.
 - Provide water from an alternative source.

When these or other alternatives are authorized, increased surveillance of the operation is justified. Surveillance should be comparable to that provided for other operations where facilities are commonly improvised such as temporary food services at special events.

Conclusion

The local health department must decide, on a case by case basis, what actions are appropriate to protect the public health in the event of an interruption in the supply of potable water. A food service operation may be authorized to remain in operation during an interruption if its supply of potable water only if appropriate actions are taken by the operator to assure the safety of food, the cleanliness of utensils and equipment and the personal hygiene of employees.

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