What is a Sanitary Survey, and Why Metro's Perfect Score Matters

Metro Water and the EPA

Across the United States, every public water utility operates under a structured regulatory framework designed to protect the health of the public. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (also referred to as the EPA) sets the national drinking water standards under the Safe Drinking Water Act. Tennessee, like many other states, has the authority to enforce these drinking water requirements.

That means Metro Water Services must answer to state regulators, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) in this case, who apply EPA rules, conduct inspections, and ensure that Nashville's drinking water system meets some of the strictest standards in the nation. However, these aren't guidelines or suggestions. They are legal, enforceable requirements that govern everything from treatment and distribution to operator qualifications and documentation practices.

A key tool the EPA requires states to use in overseeing public water systems is the **Sanitary Survey**, a comprehensive, on-site review of how a water system operates and maintains its ability to provide safe drinking water. The EPA outlines eight critical areas for evaluation during these surveys:

1. **Source:** raw water protection
2. **Treatment:** design, operation, maintenance
3. **Distribution:** preventing contamination
4. **Finished Water Storage:** storage integrity
5. **Pumps and Pump Facilities:** reliability
6. **Monitoring & Reporting:** regulatory compliance
7. **Management & Operation:** long-term viability
8. **Operator Compliance:** staff qualifications

The survey is designed to identify any sanitary deficiencies and to assess whether the system is capable of supplying safe drinking water on an ongoing basis. The EPA describes the survey as a proactive public health measure. It allows regulatory agencies to not only verify compliance, but to educate operators and ensure the long-term reliability of the system.

These surveys are conducted regularly and involve a deep dive into every aspect of the utility's work. State regulators observe plant operations in-person and first-hand. They review monitoring records, evaluate maintenance programs, examine safety practices, and ensure all activities align with federal and state regulatory guidelines. The process is intentionally rigorous because its purpose is to safeguard the health of entire communities. Water is the lifeline of the city!

Why a Perfect Score Matters

This past month when TDEC conducted its most recent four-day sanitary survey of Metro Water Services, they followed the EPA's Sanitary Survey Manual and evaluated every aspect of the system. These components include treatment performance, documentation accuracy, and emergency response readiness. Metro Water Services earned 599 points out of a possible 599, a perfect score that reflects complete compliance across all evaluated categories.

This result is a direct reflection of Metro's commitment to excellence of our responsibility to treat and deliver clean, safe, reliable water to the Nashville community. TDEC noted that employees were observed performing calibrations, and analyses with precision, and demonstrated a strict adherence to procedure. The perfect score signals that inspectors found no deficiencies, no corrective actions needed, and absolutely no lapses in documentation. When they asked for a document or record from a specific time and date, Metro Water was able to provide. This score represents complete alignment with Metro Water expectations and EPA regulations.

Why it's Big News!

The reality is a perfect score is extremely rare, especially for a utility of MWS's size. It demonstrates how MWS adheres meticulously to nearly 600 criteria across treatment, safety, lab operations, recordkeeping, and regulatory compliance. Even the smallest of lapses in documentation such as dating paperwork or a single missing bolt on a wellhead cap or a tiny rip in a vent screen can subtract points during a sanitary survey.

Additionally, as the population service area grows, MWS is already planning to collect more water samples starting October of 2026 and maintain their perfect track record.

Their consistent performance is also reflected in their previous sanitary survey. The utility scored 99.5% in the previous survey conducted in 2024, which is already an outstanding result. This year's perfect score shows a continued improvement as demands on the system grow with Nashville's population.

What This Means for Nashville

This transparency reinforces public trust in the water system and reflects Metro's commitment not only to meeting regulations but to do so openly and proactively.

A sanitary survey is, at its core, an accountability tool. It ensures that public water providers like Metro Water Services remain fully compliant with the strict expectations set by the federal government and enforced by state authorities.

To Learn More

For anyone interested in understanding more about how sanitary surveys work or why they're essential, the EPA offers a comprehensive resource at EPA Sanitary Surveys.

Stay Tapped In!