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City's water mostly free of medicines, officials say

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Despite ongoing reports about pharmaceuticals in drinking water, local water experts say Fort Collins water is safe.

Fort Collins is the first municipality to use water from the Poudre River as it flows from the mountains to the plains, meaning the water is virtually untouched, officials said.

Fort Collins also gets drinking water from Horsetooth Reservoir, which includes water from upstream wastewater treatment facilities in the Estes Park area.

That water could contain trace amounts of pharmaceuticals, city officials said.

"We're very fortunate in that we're pretty much the first users other than the animals in the forests and the mountains," said Keith Elmund, environmental services manager for the city's utilities department. "Our drinking water is from rain and snowmelt."

Still, U.S. Geological Survey studies conducted in 2002 and 2005 in the Poudre as it winds through the Poudre Canyon west of Fort Collins found trace amounts of caffeine, disinfectants, fire retardant, household detergent and DEET, a chemical most often found in bug spray.

A recent Associated Press investigation showed traces of medication showing up in drinking water. One way that can happen is the discharge of treated wastewater - water treatment facilities can't scrub out pharmaceuticals - into rivers and other water sources.

Though Fort Collins draws drinking water upstream of the city, it discharges treated wastewater into the Poudre River, which meets the South Platte River east of Greeley and flows past cities on the state's Eastern Plains.

Water officials said they aren't sure how much of that water is used on the plains for agricultural irrigation or drinking water.

Pharmaceuticals can also travel through the human body unprocessed and are then excreted to involuntarily put pharmaceuticals in the wastewater system, said Ken Carlson, associate professor of environmental engineering at Colorado State University, who studies water quality.

"We have found everything from ibuprofen to caffeine in the wastewater stream," Carlson said. "But we are talking about parts per trillion."

Carlson said that would be like putting a droplet full of pharmaceuticals in 20 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Pharmaceuticals are much smaller molecules, making it easier to get through the numerous barriers water treatment plants set up to treat drinking water, an issue the Environmental Protection Agency will continue to study, Carlson said.

"Wastewater plants weren't designed to remove this kind of thing," Carlson said.
