

Boil Water Advisory Guidance for Industry

This guide was prepared for Georgia businesses by the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Division. Learn more by visiting agr.georgia.gov/foodsafety.aspx.

What is a Boil Water Advisory?

In the event of a water interruption to the distribution system, a local jurisdiction (city, county, etc.) may issue what is called a **Boil Water Advisory (BWA)**. The advisory does not necessarily mean the water is contaminated with bacteria, but that an event has occurred that can potentially cause bacteria to be in the drinking water. Under a BWA, before any conventional use, all tap water (or equivalent) must be brought to a rolling boil for at least 60 seconds (one minute). This precautionary action ensures that water is safe for consumption, food ingredients, or cleaning. BWAs may be limited to a single neighborhood block or could be widespread across an entire metropolitan area and/or span several counties.

WHAT CAUSES BOIL WATER ADVISORIES?

Municipal water treatment plants generally use surface water from streams or lakes for distribution. This water is treated with processes such as coagulation, filtration, sedimentation and disinfection to help eliminate contaminants (e.g., total coliforms such as *E. coli* or fecal contamination).

Compromises to these plants include, but are not limited to:

- Excessive flooding caused by weather/natural disasters
- Loss of pressure in the water distribution system
- Loss of disinfection capabilities
- Power outages
- Water line breaks

Note: Chemical contamination may also be the reason for a water advisory, but this type of contamination is more difficult to treat, and no consumption is allowed (boiling is not effective in correcting chemically contaminated water). Water contaminated with chemicals should not be used for cooking, drinking, hand washing or for pet drinking water or food preparation until the local water authority has declared it safe to do so.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A RETAIL OR MANUFACTURING FOOD ESTABLISHMENT DURING A BWA?

A BWA impacts all uses of potable water, including water for consumption, food preparation, ware washing, handwashing, and cleaning/sanitizing food contact equipment and surfaces. Typically, a firm that is affected by a BWA must stop food processing, food service and/or food-handling operations and will be limited to pre-packaged food sales. It is important to remember that BWA recommendations from the local municipality for a private home residence may be insufficient for a licensed food operator in Georgia.

During an active BWA, Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA) food safety inspectors may respond to assess the food safety handling practices, as well as the extent of the BWA's effect on the facility. The regulatory response aims to determine whether there is any significant threat or danger to public health, or if an Imminent Health Hazard exists. In the event of a threat, actions may include voluntary destruction of the affected product or a regulatory embargo. In rare cases, the GDA may cease operations (either entirely or partially) at a firm.

GDA food safety inspectors may contact firms (either via a physical visit, phone call, email or text alert) to confirm that an affected firm has discontinued operation if a safe water supply cannot be maintained, and/or to ensure the firm is following appropriate emergency procedures. It is essential to speak with your GDA inspector about the regulations applicable to your firm.

Ice making should be discontinued under a BWA. Firms should discard existing ice and discontinue making ice. Commercially manufactured ice must be produced from a safe/unaffected water source.



BOIL WATER ADVISORY GUIDANCE CONTINUED

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A GDA REVIEW UNDER A BWA?

The GDA's Food Safety Division is a resource for the food processing and retail food industry year-round. Please contact the division any time with questions, concerns or issues in your facility. During a BWA, you are encouraged to speak with your inspector about specific regulations and requirements applicable to your firm. If the GDA contacts a facility during a BWA, the inspector's goal is to validate operations involving the preparation of food using potable water from a safe source. The inspector will verify the firm has discarded any food processed while the BWA was in effect, which cannot be re-processed (note: a processing authority or GDA must approve re-processing).

IF A GDA FOOD SAFETY INSPECTOR CONTACTS A FIRM DURING A BWA EVENT, THEY MAY ASK QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

Does your firm have a procedure in place for a BWA? (You may be asked to describe the procedure, including facility cleaning and handwashing procedures during the advisory)

Is water involved in your processing? (You will be asked how water is used; e.g., as an ingredient, to move product during production, as a product rinse, wet processes, etc.)

If a municipality's BWA notice contains a definite time of when the BWA was initiated, you'll be asked about any processing done before/during/after that time, including the status of the product and what your plans are for any product that may require disposal. If no specific time is included, use the best time available to ensure the safety of all food products.

WHAT IS AN APPROVED "ALTERNATIVE WATER SOURCE?"

Water as an ingredient must be derived from an adequate source. Temporary procedures that may be acceptable during a BWA include:



Boiling water to use as potable water.



Commercially bottled water.



Haul water from an approved public water supply (not under a BWA) in a covered, food-grade container that has been cleaned & sanitized.



Obtaining water from a licensed drinking water tanker truck.

Note: Automated equipment used to make beverages (auto-fill coffee makers, instant hot water dispensers, juice or tea dispensers, etc.) may not be used because they do not sufficiently heat/boil water to make it safe for drinking.

WHEN WILL MY BUSINESS BE NOTIFIED ABOUT THE END OF THE BWA?

The local water authority is responsible for notifying its customers of the start and end of a BWA. It is recommended you directly contact your water provider for additional details. Please note, in the rare case that the GDA issues a cease-operations or closes a facility (or portion of a facility's operations) due to an imminent health hazard, the GDA must authorize the reopening of a firm. After a BWA has ended, flush affected water systems (both in the building and within any processing equipment). Run tap water faucets before using, discard the first batch of ice, and consider equipment or areas of the facility that may require additional sanitizing.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

If you have questions about your water supply during a BWA, please contact your water authority. Contacting the local municipality beforehand to learn about their system for communications is a proactive step you can take in your firm's food emergency planning. You may also reach out to your GDA inspector at any time with questions relating to food safety in your firm. Reach the GDA main office at 404-656-3600. www.agr.georgia.gov.