

Brandon Fire District #1 Superintendent Ray Counter holds a glass of Brandon's top-shelf tap water, which is now classified as the best in the state.

Photo by Lee Kahrs

By LEE J. KAHR

BRANDON — When people ask what makes Brandon so special, residents can now honestly say, "It's in the water."

After a decade-long effort, Brandon Fire District #1 Superintendent Ray Counter has successfully secured an improved classification for Brandon's drinking water from the state Water Quality Division, the first Class II designation in Vermont.

"It's a great thing," said Counter, a soft-spoken man who has been the helm of the fire district since 1997. "I always felt we needed to take more steps than other communities because we don't use any chemicals. Our water comes straight out of the ground and out of the tap." That's right. The water in Brandon is not treated at all, no chlorine, no purification of any kind. It's not even filtered. Counter said he recognized the high quality of the water here soon after he became superintendent of the fire district. It didn't take long for him to realize that steps should be taken to protect the town's aquifer, the source of this great water hundreds of feet under the ground.

"That's my major goal, what can we do today to protect our water in Brandon, water that other communities would love to have," Counter said

So, in 2000, Counter starting talking to the state Water Quality Division at the Agency of Natural Resources about changing the town's classification.

In 1985, Vermont passed the Groundwater Protection Rule and Strategies, a sweeping set of laws aimed at protecting the

state's drinking water sources. Water could be designated in one of four classes based on quality, Class I being utterly pristine water and Class IV being undrinkable water near landfills and hazardous waste areas suitable for some agricultural, industrial and commercial use.

Counter said the default classification for all of the state's municipal water systems was Class III after the groundwater rule was passed.

In 2000, Counter sent a letter to the Water Quality Division asking about getting an improved classification for Brandon's water, and was told there were no procedures in place to handle such a request.

While there were no state procedures in place to improve a town's water classification, there are 10 areas across the state that have since been downgraded to Class IV groundwater.

"I had to wait for the state to write the procedure," Counter said. "So, that's why it took so long to get the Class II designation... but I'm patient."

While he waited, Counter partnered with the Vermont Geological Survey (VGS) to obtain funds available to State Geological Surveys from the U.S. Geological Survey STATEMAP program to map the surface geology and produce maps for groundwater resources in Brandon. This work was completed by VGS personnel from 2005 to 2006. Counter also enlisted the help of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to complete an investigation of the hydraulic connection, all at little or not cost to the town.

With the reclassification to Class II comes additional protections for Brandon's groundwater on the state level. The following is a list of unacceptable activities in a Class II groundwater area:

- the construction of new or

expanded use of unpermitted injection wells; unsewered floor drains; construction and demolition debris disposal facilities; municipal solid waste disposal facilities; hazardous waste disposal facilities

- new, improperly constructed or protected wells
- the installation of new underground storage tanks not meeting the Agency's underground storage tank criteria pursuant to Chapter 8 of the Environmental Protection Rules;

- any activity which results in discharges to the groundwater of any hazardous or radioactive waste

- new subsurface ground water discharges of sewage from individual residences which do not meet the Secretary's sewage disposal rule criteria

- new stockpiles of highway de-icing salt or salted sand piles

- new pit privies

- new junkyards and

- new commercial storage or mixing facilities for fertilizers, pesticides or other hazardous materials.

For comparison, the list of unacceptable activities in a Class III groundwater is merely "any activity which results in discharges to the groundwater of any hazardous or radioactive waste."

Brandon's municipal water comes from three wells, one on Newton Road and two off Town Farm Road near two operating gravel pits. Together, the wells meet a demand of roughly 471,000 gallons per day population of approximately 3,865 people through 1,175 service connections.

Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Deb Markowitz said Counter is to be commended for his commitment to Brandon's water quality.

"We really appreciate all of his hard work," she said. "He's

really been terrific.”

Markowitz said that state has learned a few things through writing the new re-classification procedure and credits Counter for his perseverance.

“This is all about protecting our groundwater for the future,” she said. “We’ve learned to have the fire district deeply involved and to partner with other community groups and move it forward. We’re hoping others will see this (re-classification) and follow. Being the first is always more difficult.”

On the side of Counter’s Brandon Fire District #1 truck is the slogan, “Quality on Tap, Our Commitment, Our Profession.” Those are not just words, but something he and his crew strive for every day. Counter’s commitment to Brandon’s water quality is as deep as the aquifer and he is ecstatic about the re-classification.

“It’s awesome and I want everybody in the state to know about it,” he said. “I want people to come to Brandon and drink our water and see a great place Brandon is.”