Private Wells in Real Estate Transactions

This factsheet from Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change explains what to do when buying or selling a property that uses a private well. It tells buyers, sellers, and real estate professionals how to check the water quality, how much water the well can provide, and what well construction records to look for in Nova Scotia.

Realtor / Lender's checklist

- ☐ **Check that the lab reports are from an accredited lab and meet the testing needs for financing.**

  This includes the two bacteria tests and the chemical and metals test.

- ☐ **Make sure the water samples were taken the right way.**

  This means:

  - A qualified person collected the samples
  - The right bottles were used
  - The samples were kept cold and delivered on time
  - The chain-of-custody form was completed

Seller's checklist

- ☐ **Gather all well information you have.**

  This includes the well log, well depth, casing length, static water level, the well's estimated yield, and pump details.

- ☐ **Provide recent water test results.**

  Share accredited lab reports for both bacteria tests and the chemical and metals test.

- ☐ **Tell the buyer about any recent changes.**

  Let them know if you recently cleaned the well with chlorine (shock chlorination) or changed or serviced any treatment systems, such as UV lights or filters.

- ☐ **Ensure sampling taps are easy to access, both before and after treatment systems.**

Buyer's checklist

- ☐ **Find out what kind of water supply the home has.**

  Is it a drilled well, dug well, surface water source, or cistern?

- ☐ **Arrange water testing with an accredited lab.**

  You need two bacteria tests, taken at least 5 days apart, and a full chemistry and metals test.

- ☐ **If the home has a treatment system** (like UV light or chlorine), take samples before the system and after it. This shows if the source water is safe and if the system is working.

- ☐ **Ask the seller if they recently disinfected the well with chlorine (shock chlorination).**

  If they did, wait 5 days before testing so the results are accurate.

- ☐ **Check if the well can make enough water for your home.**

  Look at both well yield (how fast water flows in) and storage. If records are missing or unclear, ask for a professional yield test.

- ☐ **Ask for the well construction record (well log).**

  Look at well depth, casing length, static water level, and the reported yield.

- ☐ **If any test results are above safe limits, retest to confirm.**

  This ensures the test results are accurate.

- ☐ **If any test results are still above safe limits, explore water treatment options.**

  Contact water treatment companies for treatment options to make the water safe. Include purchase and operating costs when planning and negotiating.

- ☐ **Check that the well is able to provide enough water for the people living in the home.**

  If the well yield is unknown, uncertain, or seems low, recommend a professional well test by a qualified contractor.

Water Quality:
What to test and what results mean

Bacteria in Well Water
(Total coliforms and *E. coli*)

- Take two water samples for bacteria testing. The samples must be taken at least 5 days apart. If possible, take one sample after a heavy rain.
- If a chlorine smell or recent "shock chlorination" is reported, wait at least 5 days before sampling to get accurate test results.
- If the home has a treatment system, take two types of samples:
  - Untreated water (before the system)
  - Treated water (after the system)
- This checks if the well water is safe and if the treatment system is working.
- Use an accredited lab for all bacteria tests. Labs may report bacteria as Presence/Absence or as a number.
- If bacteria are found in untreated water, do not drink it. The water must be treated before it is safe to use.

Chemical
(Complete general chemistry and metals scan recommended)

- Use an accredited lab for chemical testing. Ask for a general chemistry test and a metal scan test for drinking water.
- Compare results to drinking water health guidelines.
- Plan for treatment if any results are above safe limits. This may include a sediment filter, water softener, anion exchange system, or reverse osmosis. These systems can remove different chemicals and metals from the water.

Water Quantity:
Yield, Storage, and Use


Drilled Well


Dug Well

- **Well yield** means how fast water flows into the well from the aquifer while the pump is running.
- **Well storage** means how much water the well can hold. Dug wells are wide and shallow, so they hold more water but can run dry in drought. Drilled wells are narrow and deep, so they hold less water but usually give a steadier supply.
- **Water use:** A typical four-person home uses about 1,350 Litres/day (about 300 imperial gallons/day).
- Use the well yield on the well log when available. If the well log is missing or unclear, ask a qualified well contractor to do a pumping (yield) test to find out how much water the well can provide.

Well Construction Records
(Well Logs)

- Well logs show important details about the well. They usually list the well's depth, casing length, initial water level, the driller's yield test estimate of how much water the well can produce, and the type of rock or soil.
- Some older wells are not listed online. If you cannot find the record, the seller may need to contact the original well contractor or a previous owner.
- Well yield can change over time. Changes in the ground or the condition of the well can affect how much water it produces. If the existing records are old, consider having a qualified contractor do updated testing.

Interpreting Results: Fast Pathway to Solutions

If bacteria are found in the untreated water
- ➧ Plan to fix the source of the problem and/or install a proven disinfection system (such as UV or chlorine).
- ➧ Retest for confirmation.

If chemical or metal levels are above safe limits
- ➧ Talk to a water treatment professional about the right type of treatment and the costs.
- ➧ Be aware that treatment needs may affect financing or price negotiations during a sale.

If the well yield is low, uncertain, or unknown
- ➧ Ask a qualified well contractor to perform a pumping test to determine how much water the well can deliver.
- ➧ You may need to add water storage or, in some cases, consider another water source.

Useful Links

- **Well Contractor search** (certified well drillers/diggers/pump installers): https://novascotia.ca/nse/cms/search.asp
- **Online Well Logs Database search:** https://novascotia.ca/nse/groundwater/welldatabase.asp
- **Approved Water Testing Labs in NS** https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/waterlabs.asp
- **The Drop on Water** (parameter fact sheets): https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/docs/Drop_on_Water_English.pdf
- **Drinking Water Interpretation Tool** (to check results against guideline values): https://novascotia.ca/nse/dwit/

This Fact Sheet complements the Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change publication: ***Private Wells: A Complete Guide to Protecting Your Family's Water***