

Best-testing water in U.S.: White Salmon, Washington

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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- If you want to taste the best public water in the rural United States, better head out to the Columbia River Gorge.

White Salmon, Washington -- population 2,143 -- won top honors Tuesday at the Great American Water Taste Test.

"Our ground water is exceptional in its quality," said Will Keyser, Director of Public Works and Community Planning for the city White Salmon.

White Salmon is about 60 miles east of Portland, Oregon, on the north side of the Columbia River, in southernmost Washington state.

Keyser said the Columbia Rim Water Association has two wells that serve 1,500 homes, or about 3,500 people in White Salmon, Bingen and the port of Klickitat, Washington.

The two wells -- one is 855 feet deep, the other is 1,242 feet deep -- are recharged by mountain springs, which get their water from snowmelt off nearby mountains.

The water contains only the minimal amount of chlorine required by law.

Keyser said the area figures it has about a 60-year supply of crisp, fresh water for its residents.

The taste test is held every year on Capitol Hill, sponsored by the National Rural Water Association.

Three judges -- all Senate staffers -- were given glasses of five different entries. They held their glasses to the light, swirled the liquid, and dipped their noses in the glasses to judge the water's "clarity" and "bouquet" and then sipped for "taste".

Every state in the nation held preliminary contests to pick the best water from a rural water system in their state. Those entries were judged on Monday in Washington and the top five were made finalists.

The finalists were from: the City of Emporia, Kansas; Grand Forks Trail Water District in Thompson, North Dakota; Zephyr Water Supply Corp. in Zephyr, Texas; Trico Water in Dillon, South Carolina; and the winning entry of Columbia Rim Water Association in White Salmon, Wash.

Before the taste test, the National Rural Water Association honored Sen. Robert Byrd, D-West Virginia, with its "Green Key" award in honor of his service in "protecting and improving the environment, public health, and the quality of life in rural America in the areas of drinking water, wastewater, and source water protection."

Byrd is chairman of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, which often dispenses federal money for rural water projects. He spoke at the event about growing up in a rural valley of southern West Virginia in the 1920s, where there was no running water.

Byrd thanked the water experts in attendance for "working small miracles every week". He said many Americans now take clean, public, running water for granted.

"But many people living in small rural communities still can't take it for granted," Byrd said. "It's almost unimaginable that a country like the U.S. can't have safe, clean water everywhere."