



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 21, 2013

Water Complaint Could Be “Act of Terrorism,” Official Warns

If you’re ever in Mount Pleasant, Tennessee, don’t complain about the water there. A state official recently warned that an unfounded complaint about water quality could be considered an “act of terrorism,” the *Tennessean* [reported](#) Thursday.



The comment by Sherwin Smith, deputy director of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, came during a May 29 meeting with Maury County residents about a problem in Mount Pleasant, where residents have been complaining for months about the water, the Nashville paper reported, with some claiming their children have become sick from drinking it. Smith said people were making complaints and then turning down the department’s offer to test their water to see what the problem might be.

“We take water quality very seriously. Very, very seriously,” Smith said in remarks captured on tape by members of Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM) “But you need to make sure that when you make water quality complaints you have a basis, because federally, if there’s no water quality issues, that can be considered under Homeland Security an act of terrorism.”

“Wha — Can you say that again, please?” an audience member asked.

“What I’m saying is if you’ve got concerns about your drinking water, that’s very important, we take that very seriously,” Smith said. “But under federal regulation, if you make allegations against the public water supply that are unfounded, then that can be considered under Homeland Security an act of terrorism, because you’re trying to allege things about —”

“And who would the ‘you’ be in this case, Mister Smith?” the questioner interrupted.

“I’m not saying — I’m not making the accusation,” Smith said. “I’m just telling you, so that you understand —”

At that point comments become unclear, as several people are speaking at once. One voice can be heard saying something about a “scare tactic.”

State Rep. Sheila Butt, who organized and attended the event, was among those taken aback by Smith’s comments, as she told *Tennessean* reporter Brian Haas. “I think that we need to be very careful with how we use the words ‘terrorist’ and ‘terrorism,’” the Columbia Republican said. “I thought it was out of context. That did not apply to anything that we were discussing at the meeting.” While many in attendance expressed bewilderment at Smith’s words, no one mistook the state official for Dale



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Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

"I was sitting there with my mouth open," Mount Pleasant resident Joycelene Johns told Haas. "I couldn't believe he was saying that." His message, she said, amounted to, "Leave us alone. Don't come back anymore. We're not going to continue on dealing with whatever problem you may have."

"I think it's just to quash us complicating life for them," said Brad Wright, one of the organizers of the citizens action group.

When asked about the remark, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation took the precautionary measure of making sure Smith would not be available for comment.

"In terms of the comments made by a member of the Water Resources Division at the meeting, we are just receiving the information and looking into this on our end," spokeswoman Meg Lockhart told the *Tennessean*. "The department would like to fully assess what was said in the meeting. I am told that the meeting was far longer than the audio clip provided by SOCM and that Mr. Smith actually clarified his remarks. But again, we are looking into it."

Explaining Sherwin Smith may be a challenge for the department, but one less daunting, perhaps, than the quality of water in Mount Pleasant. Joycelene Johns said the water has been both odd tasting and cloudy in appearance for years. But she drinks by faith, not by sight.

"I'll drink it," she said, "but I pray before the first sip."

Joycelene Johns, 68, has lived in Mount Pleasant off and on for about 30 years and has put up with cloudy, odd-tasting water for years.



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