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Opinion: Delaware breweries know how important clean water is

Craig Wensell and Martha Narvaez Published 9:36 a.m. ET Dec. 14, 2018 | Updated 9:39 a.m. ET Dec. 14, 2018



(Photo: Submitted by Craig Wensell)

Craig Wensell is the chief executive officer at Wilmington Brew Works. Martha Narvaez is a policy scientist with the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration Water Resources Center.

A water policy scientist walks into a brewery and meets the business owner during the grand opening.

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but really, it's a reflection on how water quality affects more than our environment. It affects the quality of our beer, and by extension, our local economy.

When Wilmington Brew Works reopened in a 100-year-old former laboratory site in Wilmington's old Ninth Ward, it piqued a ton of curiosity from its neighbors. In the first few weeks, folks asked many questions about the facility, the brewing process and plans for the first production brewery in Wilmington since 1955.

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But what was most surprising to us was the response we heard when there was a quick mention of Wilmington's ideal location because of the quality of its water. People murmured, "Wilmington? Really? I didn't know the quality was considered good," among other comments.



Martha Narvaez is a policy scientist with University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration Water Resources Center. (Photo: Ambre Alexander Payne)

But, yes, Wilmington's water was exactly what Wilmington Brew Works was looking for when it began operations. Although Wilmington Brew Works chose the site, it did in thanks to its unique location and history of the building. The location's drinking water supply was a pleasant and much-appreciated surprise that became a cornerstone ingredient in the brewery's recipe for success.

Why? Its chemistry, its cleanliness and its cost.

Wilmington's city water is extremely easy to work with. The "soft" water allows Wilmington Brew Works to easily manipulate the water chemistry and tailor it to specific beers. Quite simply, the brewing process involves using filters to remove the chlorine, making it taste absolutely delicious. The next step is building up the water chemistry to accent the hops or malt to get the flavor just right.

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Wilmington's soft water is also advantageous because hard water leaves mineral deposits that harbor organisms and bacteria. But, our city's soft water makes sanitization in the brewing vessels much easier.

Finally, there is the cost. For every completed barrel of beer, three barrels (which equals 31 gallons) of water is needed. The city of Wilmington's water could be considered a bargain.

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If the city's water quality were to get worse, the brewery would be forced to bring in expensive filters, change the brewing chemistry and add sanitation processes that would result in increased expenses. Often it is costs like these that are passed on to the consumer.

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Brewing beer is just one example of how water quality touches every aspect of our lives. Clean water is important to our health, our environment and our economy. The water, wetland resources and ecosystems contained in Delaware's watersheds are an economic engine for the state.

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According to a report of Delaware Water Resources Center (January 2012) on the economic value of Delaware's watersheds, Delaware's water resources and habitats contribute over \$6 billion in annual economic activity. The water resources of the state, such as the drinking water that is used to brew our local beer, provide real and significant economic benefits to the state and are worthy of investment to keep them healthy and productive.

Water quality touches so many parts of our lives that over 50 stakeholders from the business, conservation, academic and nonprofit communities have come together in the Clean Water: Delaware's Clear Choice campaign to support a dedicated funding stream for clean water projects in Delaware.

Some of our members recognize water quality's importance to public health. Others are focused on what water quality means to our ecosystem and wildlife. Many recognize that a decline in water quality would mean a decline in our tourism industry and economy overall.

From small-scale aspects like brewing beer to essential needs like our health and well-being, we need to make clean water a cornerstone issue. Here in Wilmington and across the state, we must continue to invest in water now so we continue to enjoy good beer while also improving our environment our health and our economy by encouraging businesses to come to Delaware for more than just our tax benefits and location.

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