

# Hazardous toxics found in 18 wells

## SV contamination called small

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel Staff Writer

SCOTTS VALLEY — Contamination in as many as 18 wells has been detected in the Scotts Valley area.

While only a few of the contaminated wells have turned up pollution levels high enough to be considered unsafe by state and federal standards, the traces of potentially hazardous materials in the water have raised serious questions about another issue: Where are the chemicals coming from and how can the contamination be stopped?

It appears that the amount of contamination is small, so far. But the wells in question provide water to the city's residents. The most recent discoveries have come to light during five tests of private wells as part of the state's "hot spot" program.

At least one official, Scotts Valley Water District Manager John McGuire, believes "a great deal of the problem" is coming from home-cleaning supplies.

San Lorenzo Valley Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, in a report to the Board of Supervisors last Tuesday, said he doesn't know where it's coming from. He has asked the county Health Services Administrator to coordinate local, state and federal identification and clean-up efforts.

The board approved Cucchiara's recommendation, and directed the HSA administrator to find grants and federal programs that can help defray the high costs of cleaning up the water. A report is due back on some of the problems March 19.

The reports have clearly upset Cuc-

chiara.

"There have been (as many as) 18 locations identified to date where toxic contamination exists, and yet only two identified causes," said Cucchiara.

"There has not been a coordinated effort to determine what the cause of these finds is," said Cucchiara. "To date, it's been kind of a hit-and-miss, hopscotch effort to respond to the problems.

"But the bigger issue has yet to be asked: Where is the contamination coming from?" he said.

The two sites where officials believe they know the answer to that question are Watkins-Johnson and Sky Park Airport. At Watkins-Johnson, officials believe someone poured a 55-gallon drum of chemicals into a septic tank, causing contamination in water wells. At Sky Park, airplane engine oils have turned up on the ground. More tests are being done to determine if the water is contaminated.

Scotts Valley Water District Manager McGuire said he suspects most of the other contamination in the Scotts Valley wells come from products around the home.

McGuire said household products that get dumped in the ground — such as paint thinner, degreasing agents, oven cleaners and other substances — are probably the cause of much of the recently discovered trace contamination in the water wells.

He said he's talked at great deal with Ray Talley, director of the County Environmental Health Department, about

Please see Page A2

### Continued from Page A1

the problem. But the county, he said, is "zeroing in on the 55-gallon level," and can't "get down to the level in everybody's house."

"That may be where a great deal of the problem is," said McGuire.

He said the amount of contamination is small, so far. "The aquifer is fairly large, and if you were to quantify it (the amount of chemicals in the water) it would be 10 gallons. That's not a whole lot of material."

But Scotts Valley's problem is that the water wells serving the city draw their water from the Santa Margarita aquifer, which serves all of Scotts Valley and portions of the San Lorenzo Valley. The two San Lorenzo Valley wells drawing from the Santa Margarita aquifer were closed previously because of high nitrates (fertilizers) in the water.

Recently the Environmental Protection Agency determined that Santa Margarita is a "sole source aquifer."

"That designation is critical to the entire Scotts Valley area and portions of the San Lorenzo Valley dependent on the water supply coming from this one source — a bathtub, if you will," said Cucchiara.

Cucchiara said even though the contamination levels are small, "If we contaminate it, we're inheriting a problem. ... The sooner you act, the more chance you have of reversing the trend."

To date, contamination has turned up in the following locations:

- **Watkins-Johnson.** Hazardous chemicals used in cleaning solvents — trichloroethylene (TCE), trichloroethane (TCA) and perchlorethylene (PCE) — are present in the water. W-J officials believe it came from an act of vandalism.

- **Sky Park Airport.** Owned by the city of Santa Cruz and closed. The city has been ordered by the Regional Water Quality Control Board to drill two additional monitoring wells to look for TCE, TCA and PCE. Previous reports have turned up no contamination in the water, but signs of degreasing agents being dumped on the ground have been spotted.

- **Two El Pueblo wells and one City Hall well in Scotts Valley.** Traces of TCE and Toulene (a cleaning agent) have turned up in the City Hall well. McGuire speculated in a report that the pump and motor for the city well may have caused the contamination. As to the El Pueblo wells, which have shown TCE and PCE, it's undetermined what caused the contamination.

- **Private wells.** Five private wells in Scotts Valley have been tested under the state's "hot spot" program. Three of the

wells tested positive for chlorobenzene and dichlorobenzene, according to a report by Al Haynes, San Lorenzo Valley watershed analyst. While benzene is a proven carcinogen, according to Haynes, chlorobenzenes are still being studied to determine their toxicity. The other two have traces of toulene and a "high level of total organic carbon," according to Haynes' report.

- **Champion and Estrella wells.** Both wells are under San Lorenzo Valley Water District jurisdiction. Both have shown traces of TCA and PCE, according to Haynes. Neither is at a point where they're considered "actionable" by the state.

McGuire said the water wells managed by the Scotts Valley Water District are safe. Treatment on the city wells "eliminates any volatile organic compounds," by two different methods — aeration and a combination coagulant and carbon filter system.

As to the problem of home contamination, McGuire said, "I don't see any easy solution to it."

"It will take a tremendous amount of education to tell people how to deal with these household items, and what to do with them. In many cases, there's no substitute for them, except elbow grease."

"People won't believe they've been polluting their own back yards," said McGuire.

McGuire said one of the problems is that people don't know the materials they use at home are hazardous, and so they dump them in their back yards or in their trash cans.

It costs about \$50 to send a \$2 bottle of cleaning liquid to a classified dump site, said McGuire. It's a cost most people are unwilling to pay.

The county Hazardous Materials Advisory Commission is planning a home clean-up program for three weekends in spring, wherein residents will be able to dump their potentially hazardous supplies at a designated site. The substances will then be taken to a Class I dump site free of charge, said commission chairwoman Marjorie Bourret.

As part of the program, the commission will do an aggressive education program to inform the public of the dangers on their own shelves, said Bourret.

To Cucchiara, the reports on water-well contamination "are our own home-grown version of what we've been reading about in the Silicon Valley and other parts of the nation."

"Tuesday's board action adds some focus to the problem," he said. "The big picture, to quote John McGuire, is not good."