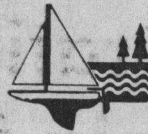


Local



Trouble looms over use of once-tainted water

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Water district officials want to use treated water that had been tainted by a chemical spill at a local electronics plant for drinking water.

But they're running into objections from the City Council, the county Board of Supervisors and some residents, who are wary of the agency's ability to totally clean up the water.

The dispute centers around Watkins-Johnson's plans to clean up a chemical spill on its Scotts Valley property.

Large amounts of trichloroethylene, an industrial solvent, were dumped down a drain and have been found in the septic tank and the groundwater near the plant.

Levels of TCE in the groundwater have been as high at 750 parts per billion, say Watkins-Johnson officials. The Environmental Protection Agency has set five parts per billion as a safe level.

The plan, which was initially estimated to last anywhere from seven to 10 years, involves drilling three wells which will draw out contaminated groundwater underneath the company's Scotts Valley property.

The water would be cleaned using 36-foot-high counter-current air stripping devices which would allow the toxic chemicals to be dispersed into the air.

The wells would suck up toxic groundwater around the clock at a rate of 648,000 gallons a day. Watkins-Johnson has proposed dumping the treated water into Bean Creek.

But Scotts Valley Water Board directors "don't want to waste the water," said water district Manager John McGuire.

They want to hire a toxic chemicals expert to help make sure the water meets state standards, and use it as drinking water.

"I've talked long and hard with the Environmental Health Department, the city's toxic materials consultants, and the state Health Department," says McGuire. "Everyone agrees that if the water can be cleaned to drinkable standards, it should not be wasted," says McGuire.

But some elected officials are not convinced the water can be kept clean consistently.

The Scotts Valley City Council has sent a letter to the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the state Department of Health Services saying that the city is

"gravely concerned" that using the water "may pose a potential health risk to the public."

Furthermore, "because the air-stripping process is not 100 percent failsafe, there can be no guarantee that ... it will always eliminate the highly toxic organic contaminants in the water," says one letter, written to the Department of Health Services by Mayor Barbara Leichter.

Approval from the state Department of Health is necessary before Scotts Valley Water District can use the water.

Councilman Joe Miller says Watkins-Johnson's air-stripping procedures work best in hot, dry weather.

"Our consultants said this plan was a bad idea, and I totally concur with them," Miller said. "They say they're going to make the water safe but they haven't offered us any proof."

Supervisor Joe Cucchiara has also written the Regional Water Quality Control Board, urging directors to take residents' concerns into account when they review Watkins-Johnson's clean-up plan.

Bruce Williams, head of the clean-up program at Watkins-Johnson, says such protests are ridiculous.

"They don't know what they're talking about," Williams said. "They're trying to make this a political issue. But people who are familiar with the technology know it is safe."

A preliminary study shows that the treated groundwater will actually be cleaner than water Scotts Valley residents are already getting, Williams maintained.

Williams said he will be providing the City Council with results of these and other studies in June.

But if they still protest, "we'll just dump the water in the creek," he said.

Another concern of water district officials is that Watkins-Johnson may be drawing so much water out of the aquifer that it might affect the district's wells.

Williams believes there's enough water in the aquifer to handle the kind of sustained pumping the company is proposing.

Watkins-Johnson and the water district agreed to set aside their differences so that the water could be used jointly.

Groundwater recharge, wherein treated water would be pumped into holding ponds for eventual percolation into the soil, is another possible use of the water.

This would make the water safe to drink, but recharge takes a long time and "you can't recharge as much as you take out," Williams said.