

EPA official defends TCE cleanup

By TOM LONG

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SCOTTS VALLEY — An Environmental Protection Agency official said Tuesday that he doesn't expect his agency's involvement in the cleanup of contaminated water at the Watkins-Johnson site here will "slow (the cleanup) down significantly."

But when asked whether he personally thought the EPA should be involved in the Watkins-Johnson cleanup effort, Remedial Project Manager Leo Levenson said, "I really can't comment on that."

Levenson called the Sentinel Tuesday in response to a story on the negative reaction that many Scotts Valley officials have had to the federal agency's involvement — which many see as interference — with the contamination cleanup process.

The article noted that the Sentinel had repeatedly attempted over more than a week's time to contact EPA officials, but calls were never returned. Levenson apologized for the EPA's lack of response, saying the calls had gone unanswered due to a bureaucratic procedure that kept him from being aware of them.

One of the main worries that many Scotts Valley officials expressed about the EPA's involvement was that it would

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bring in a large bureaucracy that would take a long time to get things done.

Levenson also said agency policy hindered an attempt to take a larger overview of Scotts Valley's water contamination problems.

"The origin of EPA involvement is that there were a number of groundwater problems that were reported to EPA in Scotts Valley," Levenson said. "We were going to look at Scotts Valley as an area-wide site."

"But policy was we would not list area-wide sites on our Superfund list," Levenson said. So the Watkins-Johnson site alone, which has been the subject of a cleanup program supervised by the state for more than a year now, was suggested for the Superfund list of priority sites to be supervised by EPA.

Many officials charged that the EPA's involvement was politically motivated, and that the site provided an easy opportunity for the agency to come in and

take credit for cleaning up a comparatively simple contamination problem.

"I would agree with anyone that it's completely undesirable that there would be such an amount of time between the discovery and our coming in," Levenson said. "But there's nothing sinister in that."

In 1984, a 55-gallon drum of trichloroethylene was dumped into the company's septic tank by a disgruntled employee, according to Watkins-Johnson officials. The solvent — commonly called TCE, known to cause cancer in lab animals and a suspected carcinogen in humans — spread into the septic tank's leach field and contaminated both underground water systems, called aquifers, in the area near the plant.

Watkins-Johnson is currently pumping 360,000 gallons a day of the contaminated water through a filtering system that reduces the TCE level to acceptable fed-

eral guidelines.

Since the cleanup effort first began, a task force of city, county and state agencies have been monitoring the site. All were satisfied that the cleanup — which may take as long as 20 years to complete — was being handled well by Watkins-Johnson.

The EPA, though, has its own methods of evaluation.

"I don't want to be criticizing the procedures of other agencies, but our procedures are different in terms of thoroughness," Levenson said.

"In their last report, Watkins-Johnson has admitted they don't have a full picture of where the contamination came from and we would like that picture to be as clear as possible," Levenson said.

Levenson also said he doesn't expect the cleanup effort to be significantly slowed by the agency's involvement.

"There's been a lot of concern about whether we want work to be repeated and that certainly is not our intention," Levenson said.

"In terms of the length of time involved in the cleanup, I don't believe we'll slow it down significantly," Levenson said.

"But sometimes you do find that things take longer just to be more thorough," Levenson added.