WATER POLLUTION

Poisoning our groundwater supply

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By JOHN McNICHOLAS
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SANTA CRUZ — Public attention has focused recently on pollution by industry, illegal dumping and accidental spills. But county residents throwing household products into the trash may have turned our dumps into cauldrons where a witches' stew is brewing, seeping slowly down to irrevocably poison our water supply.

"Anything we put in the garbage goes to the dumps, and the dumps are not built to contain that stuff," says Harry Ungar, Cabrillo College chemistry instructor and a member of the county's Hazardous Materials Advisory Commission. "Anything we put in there eventually will leach down, and eventually will poison our groundwater.

"One person's garbage isn't going to do that. But with thousands of people's garbage over years and years, which is essentially what we've been doing, we're setting up a situation in which we can pollute our groundwater."

Ungar and the commission have designed a pilot program in which residents may bring household chemicals to collection sites. The substances will be packed safely by experts and hauled to a dump near Coalinga designated as a toxic dumping site.

Groundwater pollution is "essentially an irreversible process," Ungar says. "Theoretically, we can clean these chemicals out of the water, but to do it for all our drinking water would be a fabulously expensive proposition. Once the chemicals get in the groundwater, the cost becomes so enormous, it's not really a practical proposition. We have to work to keep these chemicals from ever getting into the water."

The "chemicals" to which Ungar refers aren't necessarily the substances recognized as immediately dangerous to the environment or our health, such as DDT.

They are hot tub and pool supplies. Cleaners and disinfectants. Photographic supplies. Wood varnishes and stains. Solvents. Flea collars and pest strips. Charcoal lighter. The stuff that gets stored on shelves until the next sweep of the garage, and thrown into the trash or down the drain every day.

Ungar says there is no way to tell how much toxic material has been buried in the four dumps in the county. Nor is there any way to know if groundwater pollution is inevitable from pollutants dumped in the last 20 years.

"We don't know what those dumps will produce 10 or 20 years down the line," he said. "We do know the dumps weren't built to contain this stuff."

He and the other 10 commissioners are concerned that low-

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level contamination may not show any effects on public health until decades later, when the incidence of cancer may rise.

"It might not be that you'll take a drink of water and fall over dead. But if you drink it for 30 years, you might get cancer. It will show up statistically, but we won't be able to prove one person got cancer from drinking one glass of water."

Ungar says one case of goundwater contamination from a suspected domestic source has shown up in the San Lorenzo Valley Water District. In the district's Champion well, minute traces of the degreaser tricholoroethylene, or TCE, have been detected, and the well was taken out of service. There are no industrial sources nearby, he says, and so a domestic source is likely.

Ray Talley, head of the county's Enviromental Health Department, said that in Scotts Valley, the equivalent of a 55-gallon drum of TCE was dumped into a drain leading to a septic tank at Watkins-Johnson Co., polluting the tank and groundwater. That company now is decontaminating 648,000 gallons of water a day. The clean-up could take from three to 10 years, and will cost at least $1 million, company officials estimate. Environmental officials have decreed the filtered water may not be used for drinking.

Dumping programs for household substances have been initiated in other areas, such as San Mateo and Palo Alto. But this collection is a "essentially a one-shot deal, a pilot program," Ungar says. He and the commission hope to have a continuing program in place by early 1986, but the county must determine a way to finance it.

"We'll have something in place, but we just don't know what it will be. The only real question is how to pay for it."

The cost to pack, transport and dump the materials is $160 a barrel, he says. A San Jose company, Safety Specialists, is donating eight trained people and the equipment for the project. The county is paying for the packing materials, transportation and dumping.

Ungar and the commission — which includes representatives from the community, labor, agriculture, law enforcement, fire districts and environmental workers — also hope to educate the public to avoid buying the more toxic substances.

"I think there are two main aspects to this phase of it. We're asking people to think a little differently about the products they use. We're appealing to them, saying, 'It's real imporant for your future and your children's future and the county as a whole not to poison our groundwater.

"I think the second long-term issue is we'll have to feed back to the manufacturers on this, and I think there will have to be a change in some of the products that are put on the market. There are safe substitutes for a lot of these things.

"I'm optimistic. I think we've gotten on this at an early stage. I think it's more of a potential problem, and we may have gotten on it early enough. But it's not something government can do. People are going to have to help."

obtained a copy of the report. Here

What to do with your household toxic waste

Where to go

- Sept. 28 — Public works maintenance yard, 2700 Brommer St.
- Oct. 5 — Felton Fire Station, 131 Kirby St.
- Oct. 12 — Public works maintenance yard, 198 Holohan Road, Freedom.

What to bring

- Wood preservatives, varnishes, stains
- Cleaners, disinfectants, polishes
- Oil- and lead-based paints
- Art, hobby, photographic supplies
- Outdated medicines
- Degreasers and engine cleaners
- Pesticides, herbicides, flea collars, pest strips
- Charcoal lighter
- Pool, hot tub and spa supplies

Toxic products must be labeled and in sturdy, leak-proof containers. By law, no more than five gallons or 50 pounds of hazardous household waste may be transported in one vehicle. Individual containers are limited to one gallon or 10 pounds.

Do **NOT** bring used motor oil, brake and transmission fluids and batteries, which may be recycled at gas stations; compressed gas cylinders, explosives or radioactive materials. Latex paint should be allowed to solidfy then discarded normally.

For more information, call 425-2408 or 722-3511, ext. 2408