

Nitrate levels rise in La Selva Beach water wells

By BOB SMITH
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Although they have not yet reached dangerous levels, nitrate levels in La Selva Beach water wells have been steadily rising.

Last night, the Soquel Creek Water District, the major water supplier in the La Selva area, approved a \$20,000 study of the problem. The study will look into the future with recommendations for the water district to take.

One possibility would have the district campaigning for sewer systems in the La Selva Beach area.

The district has taken a hands-off approach to sewer systems in its service areas, but that could change. Recently, the state health department refused to allow the

district to drill a new well off Rincon Drive in Rio del Mar because there were septic tanks nearby. That forced the district to buy another piece of property near Bonita Drive and San Andreas Road for a water well.

High nitrate levels in drinking water are blamed for the "blue baby" syndrome, a condition occurring after birth when nitrates interfere with the blood's ability to carry oxygen to the body's cells.

Consultant Joe Scalmanini, of Luhdorff and Scalmanini, said the nitrates showing up in the Aromas Red Sands formations, which run under the La Selva Beach community, are coming from two major sources — fertilizers used by farmers in the area and effluent

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from the thousands of home septic tanks that are La Selva's only sewage-disposal method.

It is not a problem that threatens the community's water supply in the immediate future. But in another couple of decades, it might.

"It will take a long time for a problem to occur and a long time for it to go away," Scalmanini said. "Maybe I'll come back and tell you to push the panic button. Maybe

not. But if I don't, I'll tell why, too."

Septic systems add tremendous amounts of nitrates to the water they process, Scalmanini said. About 40 parts per million of nitrates are added to water each time it is cycled through a home.

"Over the long run, that poses a threat to the aquifer," Scalmanini said.

Water board president Dan

Kriege agreed. "Technically, you can't go on using the same water forever," he said.

Sewers would cut the "nitrate loading" of the soil in the La Selva Beach area. That worked in the Pasatiempo Pines area north of Santa Cruz a decade ago. Nitrate levels in local well water dropped substantially after sewers were installed, Scalmanini said.

La Selva residents have steadfastly fought proposals to install sewers in their community. In the 1970s, residents there persuaded the Santa Cruz County Sanitation District to drop them from plans for a mid-county sewage transmission system.

The problem of rising nitrate levels extends outside the Soquel

Creek district boundaries. Wells drilled by the Central Water District at Freedom Boulevard and Highway 1 in the last two decades also show increasing levels of nitrates.

John Ricker of the county Environmental Health Services said this morning that La Selva may experience the same scenario as the San Lorenzo Valley. A building boom and more septic tank systems sent the nitrate levels up. But then they stabilized.

"We don't think they will climb much higher (in the San Lorenzo Valley) under current development conditions," he said. "In the La Selva Beach area, the levels have been somewhat low and they haven't been a concern to us."

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