

Watkins-Johnson seeks cleanup plan OK

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Watkins-Johnson Company will go before the Regional Water Quality Control Board Friday seeking a permit to pump millions of gallons of polluted underground water so that it can be cleaned and discharged into Bean Creek.

The regional board will meet at 9

a.m. at the Seaside City Council Chamber, 440 Harcourt Ave., Seaside.

Underground water pollution at the company plant in Scotts Valley began in 1984 when a 55 gallon drum of trichlorethylene (TCE) was dumped into a septic tank drain. The plant is located at the south end of Scotts Valley near city hall and the Sky Park property.

The TCE spill was detected in April 1984 and has been spreading into the underground water supply on company property. In June the chemical was detected seeping into Bean Creek.

Used as a cleanser and in small amounts as a septic tank activator, TCE has caused cancer in test rats and is a suspected carcinogen in humans.

Delays in the cleanup have included the year it took to monitor the underground spread, time to get permits and a recent delay in getting well-drilling permits from the Scotts Valley Water District.

Water Board members have resisted issuing permits for the five wells the company needs to pump out to 350 gallons a minute of the polluted water, saying that amount of

water could deplete the underground supply the city relies on for its domestic water supply.

At 350 gallons a minute the company will pump 500 acre feet of water a year into Bean Creek, a stream that flows into San Lorenzo River, which is a source of water supply for the city of Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz officials have expressed concern even though they have been assured the water will be cleansed through filtration to less than the "action levels" set by state and federal standards. "Action levels" are those amounts of pollutants that require something be done to clean them up.

Scotts Valley Water Board members are concerned about losing 500 acre-feet of water from the water table, pointing out that is half again the 1,000 acre feet the district pumps to provide the town its domestic water each year.

The local Water Board had delayed issuing permits because of its concern. Tuesday, the board went ahead and issued the company permits for five wells but restricted the permits so that in six months if there is evidence the water table is being depleted or the underground water supply is still chemically endangered, the company will have to do an environmental impact study.

The water district can also stop the pumping if the water table is endangered under new powers it recently gave itself to deal with the situation at Watkins-Johnson.

The county government this week issued a legal opinion to the regional board also calling for an environmental study if the pumping causes an impact on the water supplies involved.

San Lorenzo Water District board members Monday night called for stricter requirements on the cleanup than are recommended by the regional board staff. Water Board members said the regional requirements which call for the water to be cleaned to at least half the "action levels" should be tightened to be at least one-quarter of the "action levels."

Company officials and the executive director of the regional water board, Ken Jones, say they realize there's concern about depleting the underground water supply and impacts the treated water will have on Bean Creek.

However, both say that pumping has to begin as quickly as possible to stop its spread and clean the TCE out of the underground water table.

"Let's get the damned stuff cleaned up," Jones said recently. "It should have been cleaned up when it had a small amount of spread. You can't leave it in the ground... We cannot risk Scotts Valley's sole-source aquifer."