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Cleanup efforts

get OK

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Plant must do additional work

By Terri Morgan
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The Environmental Protection Agency has formally approved a plan to clean up soil and water contamination at the Watkins-Johnson manufacturing plant near Scotts Valley.

Terry Wilson of the EPA said the plan largely validates Watkins-Johnson's cleanup efforts, which Vice President Alfred Montaudon said will probably take 10 years to complete, at a cost of \$2.5 million.

But the plan, which was signed by the EPA on June 29, will require the company to do some additional work.

It will have to add a fifth gravity drain to collect and transfer contaminated water to an on-site treatment plant. And it will have to build a third leach field so all treated water can be discharged into the ground, instead of partly into Bean Creek, a tributary of the San Lorenzo River.

Work began in 1984

Cleanup efforts have been under way at the Watkins-Johnson Steward Division Plant, west of Scotts Valley, since 1984.

That was when company officials discovered industrial solvents trichloroethylene and 1,1,2-trichloroethane in a company septic tank. The solvents, which are classified as "probable human carcinogens" by the EPA, allegedly were poured down a drain by a disgruntled employee.

Later, the company discovered other potential cancer-causing chemicals in the water beneath the plant, which has been used for research, development and manufacturing of industrial furnaces and microwaves since 1963.

Quick action helped

Quick action by Watkins-Johnson and the local water company prevented contaminated water from reaching drinking water supplies in neighboring wells. However, levels of contamination still remain in the groundwater beneath the plant.

Watkins-Johnson began pumping out and treating the contaminated groundwater in 1986. To prevent the contaminants in the soil from being flushed into the aquifer by rainwater, the company first capped the area with asphalt, then began removing the toxic materials through a vapor-extraction process.

"Watkins-Johnson has been very cooperative," Wilson said.