

WATKINS-JOHNSON gets go-ahead for Scotts Valley water cleanup

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SEASIDE — Watkins-Johnson Co. was given a go-ahead by the Regional Water Quality Board Friday to clean up its trichlorethylene (TCE) spill that is polluting an area of underground water supply at the center of Scotts Valley.

The regional board unanimously issued an 18-month permit for the company to begin pumping Sept. 15 from five wells at a rate of up to 350 gallons a minute, filtering out the TCE and running the water into Bean Creek.

The company was told it must be able to show that its activated-carbon filtering system is cleaning the water and that the underground water supply is not being depleted before it can get a longterm permit that may run for years.

The TCE got into the aquifer (underground water table) in 1984 when a 55-gallon drum of the material was dumped into a company septic tank. The spread of the chemical has been monitored the past two years as it spread in the aquifer and in June it was detected seeping into Bean Creek.

Scotts Valley's domestic wells are upstream from the spill and have not been affected. Local health officials say there has been no threat to the public health, so far.

The regional board's quality standard for the treated water is set at one-half the federal "action level" — a level of purity at which the water should not have an adverse effect even on "sensitive" members of the population such as pregnant or nursing mothers, children, the elderly and those with chronic diseases.

The "action level," however, leaves an estimated risk that one additional cancer case could happen each year among a population of one million people. TCE is a suspected carcinogen.

If Watkins-Johnson's treatment system of two filtrations through activated carbon is as effective as expected, the water could be used domestically, according to Regional Water Board Engineer Bert Van Voris.

However, the water will not go into Scotts Valley's pipes. Eighty percent of the over 200 millions of gallons a year the company will pump will run down Bean Creek and the rest will be used as utility-water at the company plant.

The way was cleared for the regional permit this week when the Scotts Valley Water District Board Tuesday issued permits for five wells.

Water directors held back the permits for a month, saying the district was afraid its underground water supply could be depleted by the Watkins-Johnson's pumping.

District Director Howard Norton said earlier the company could pump up to 500 acre feet of water a year, which is half the amount take by the district to provide the city's its annual drinking water.

The water board's reaction to the spill was reflected during the hearing in Seaside when Scotts Valley Water District's general manager, John McGuire faced the regional board.

McGuire said the Scotts Valley

Water District will stop Watkins-Johnson from pumping if its found the water table is dropping.

The company must continually monitor the quality of treated water and the impact on Bean Creek and must let other agencies also take tests.

A company spokesman said it will monitor the underground supply at 26 wells that are being pumped. The wells are outside the perimeter of the spill but nearby. The spread of the TCE had been estimated in June at about 300 by 500 feet.

Included in the testing program is

a check on the fish in Bean Creek. Twice a year, six or more of the trout or salmon will be caught and dissected to see if the flesh has traces of TCE.

The company was told it must keep the public away from the outfall into Bean Creek. That request came from Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Officer Diane Evans.

The city of Santa Cruz has also expressed its concern since it takes a large amount of its domestic supply from San Lorenzo River which is fed by Bean Creek.