

Traces of carcinogen in SV water

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Traces of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene have turned up in drinking water here, according to reports received recently by the Scotts Valley Water District. It is believed to be the first time the carcinogen has been found in drinking water in Santa Cruz County.

Although the levels of TCE fall well below the limit considered a health risk, water district officials are concerned that the chemical has managed to slip through the water treatment process.

Tests done for the Water District by Sequoia Laboratory of Redwood City in June showed .72 parts per billion and 1.6 parts per billion of TCE in a little over a quart of water.

Samples were tested twice to make sure the results were accurate. The water was taken from a holding tank which stores domestic water.

The state action level is five parts per billion.

The "action level" is the level of contamination that the state Health Department feels could provide a health risk to a population exposed over a long time.

Water District Manager John McGuire believes the TCE is coming from a well in the El Pueblo well-field which has shown consistently high levels of the contaminant.

But he is at a loss to explain how the TCE is getting into the groundwater in the first place.

Since the Water District began testing its wells last year, Well 3A has shown increasing amounts of TCE, McGuire said.

Raw water from the well showed the following: last August, 1 part per billion of TCE in water samples; November, 2.4 and 3.0 parts per billion; February, 2.5 parts per billion and June, 2.7 parts per billion.

Last March the water district discovered TCE in partially processed water, said McGuire. The reports done in June show, for the first time, TCE in drinking water.

McGuire said the district planned to hire a consultant to help deal with the problem. A carbon-activated filter and aeration system may also be needed, he said.

"If this continues to rise, obviously, we're going to be looking at some kind of treatment process," said McGuire.

The district's treatment process is not geared towards removing TCE McGuire noted, but exposing water to air usually removes the highly-volatile chemical.

Although the El Pueblo wellfield is located between Scotts Valley Drive and Mount Hermon Road — next to a number of businesses and electronics companies — authorities were hesitant to blame industry for the contamination.

"We've been monitoring industry for the last year and we haven't seen

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any evidence that's where it's coming from," said Bob Geyer, the city's Hazardous Materials Officer.

McGuire agreed. "We just don't know where it's coming from," he said.

McGuire and Geyer said household use of items such as paint thinner, oven cleaner and gopher remedies may be the cause.

Ken Mabie, supervising sanitarian for the county Department of Environmental Health, said the TCE is a source of worry "because there shouldn't be any in the water" but said added it is fortunate "the water district found out about it before it got bad.

"Historically, we find out about these things after we have to shut down a well or find another source of water," said Mabie.

TCE is an industrial solvent often associated with the electronics industry. Excessive amounts of the

chemical have been found to cause tumors in laboratory mice.

The state "action level" for TCE is based on calculations that if a million people drink a liter of water a day for 70 years, one of them will probably contract cancer.