

# SV water board tangles with Watkins-Johnson

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Finding itself embroiled in battle with both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Watkins-Johnson corporate structure, the Scotts Valley Water District is considering charging that company for a process that would let the city reclaim 500,000 gallons of treated water the company is sending to the ocean daily.

The water board voted Tuesday night to extend until July 14 the company's right to keep pumping and treating contaminated water from the underground water system beneath its land here.

At that point, the district wants a plan for returning the treated water to the city, or the board will consider hiring a consultant to come up with a plan to reclaim the water and charge the company for the plan and — if need be — putting the plan into action.

"We've continually set dates for Watkins-Johnson to perform, and they've continually failed to perform," said board president Gene Scothorn.

According to board members, the district has been undercut in its dealings with Watkins-Johnson by the

federal Environmental Protection Agency, which has stepped in to oversee the cleanup project that began more than a year ago.

"Watkins-Johnson is telling us, 'Stick it in your ear, we're dealing with the EPA now,'" said board member Howard Norton.

"The involvement of the EPA has created an atmosphere in which Watkins-Johnson is not motivated towards cooperation," said Scothorn.

"The EPA has told them they have to start completely over," said district manager Jon Sansing. Sansing said that the district was completely satisfied with Watkins-Johnson's efforts to treat the contaminated water and make it safe; the district is upset about what it sees as a waste of its own resource.

Approximately 500,000 gallons of treated water a day — more than the amount of water used by the rest of the city — is now being being pumped into Bean Creek, where it then flows to the ocean.

Board members charged that the EPA is only interested in the cleanup effort and has shown no concern for use of the treated water.

Neither Watkins-Johnson or the EPA had a representative at Tuesday's meeting. Watkins-Johnson

hadn't responded to the city's efforts to contact the company during the month of June until a last-minute conference with Scothorn, set up just before the board meeting.

"It's clear that there's a lot of confusion in Watkins-Johnson's mind as to which master they have to serve," Scothorn said.

In 1984, a 55-gallon drum of trichloroethylene was dumped into the company's septic tank. Company officials said the hazardous material may have been poured into the tank by a disgruntled employee, although the employee was never prosecuted or identified.

The solvent — commonly called TCE and known to cause cancer in lab animals and a suspected carcinogen in humans — spread into the septic tank's leach field and contaminated both aquifers, the underground water systems, in the area near the plant.

The contaminated water is being pumped through two large filtering systems that reduce the level of TCE to .2 parts per billion. Federal guidelines place acceptable levels of the chemical at 5 parts per billion.

The town's domestic wells are upstream and have not been affected. But two new wells drilled earlier this year by Silverking Oceanic Farms

have been pumping water contaminated with TCE and may have to shut down, according to county environmental health officials. It is suspected that the Silverking wells are pulling water from the aquifer contaminated beneath Watkins-Johnson, because the wells are in that area.

So far, Watkins-Johnson's only proposal for use of the treated water is to send it to Silverking to make up for its pending deficiencies.

This proposal does not satisfy the water district, because it would still be losing 500,000 gallons a day of its own water.

"We're dealing with our water," board member Bill Kassis stressed Tuesday night. "Not Watkins-Johnson's water. Not the EPA's water."

The board seriously considered not renewing the company's permit to pump the contaminated water Tuesday. But Sansing informed the board that any shutdown of the wells for more than a few days might make the contamination problem more serious.

"I'm really reluctant to be placed in the position of causing some extension of the (contaminated water) by revoking the permit," said Scothorn.

So instead, the board came up with

the idea of charging the company with refusing to abate a nuisance or coming up with a plan to abate the nuisance.

If Watkins-Johnson does not come up with an acceptable abatement

plan by July 14, and if the district's attorney says the plan is legal, the district will then begin plans to do the abating and charge the company for the potentially substantial expense.