

Reassurance on asbestos in the water

The state health department sets no limits on the amount of asbestos in California drinking water, the Soquel Creek County Water District board was told Monday night.

Fairly high asbestos levels have been found in three of the district's water wells, and lesser amounts have been detected in three separate areas of the water distribution system.

District manager Robert Johnson told the board that a health department spokesman told him asbestos concentrations "100 to 1,000 times greater" than the 9.5 million per liter average in the district's samples are common in California surface water.

The department's position hasn't changed since 1974, and remains: "There is no evidence of any harmful effects in the quantities we have," Johnson said.

The highest levels were found in the Aptos Creek (Johnston) well above Aptos Village. In that sample, analyzed by a Southern California testing laboratory using an electron microscope, 19 million fibers per liter were counted. Water from that well normally flows into the Aptos-Seacliff distribution system.

Water collected from the Tannery Well in Soquel (supplying Soquel and Capitola) had only 2.3 million fibers per liter, and the Altivo Well in La Selva Beach measured 7.4 million fibers per liter.

Water samples collected from the distribution system showed measurable smaller concentrations. Water taken at 510 Monterey Ave. showed 1.5 million fibers per liter; samples taken from the Green Sheet office in Capitola showed just 500,000 fibers per liter; and the La Selva Beach sample, collected at 311 Mar Monte Ave., had only 300,000 fibers per liter — the lowest of any of the samples. Johnson said he was told by the health department that they routinely advise the water agencies using high-asbestos surface water supplies to filter out as much as they can, but not worry about the remainder.

"This isn't just some articles we have read but the position of the state health department," Johnson told the board, referring to charges by district critic Laurence Frommhagen that newspaper and magazine articles on the dangers of water-borne asbestos downplay the problem.

"Indeed, several researchers have found a correlation," Frommhagen told the board, "— not a very high correlation but a significant one."

(Other studies, including some by Environmental Protection Agency researchers, came up with conflicting results when the cancer rates in communities with high concentrations of asbestos in their drinking water was compared with areas without asbestos.)

Frommhagen also said his experience as a water analyst contradicts the test results on the well-water samples. He told the board he believes it improbable that groundwater would have such high concentrations. He said the test results may be wrong and asked the district to submit samples to the EPA for testing.

"I just don't think the data is right," Frommhagen added.

Board members said they might do so, but they rejected Frommhagen's proposal that he act as intermediary with the EPA. Board member Dan Kriege said the district would contact the EPA directly.

In other business Monday night, the board accepted a \$134,176 bid by Water Development of Woodland to drill eight coastal monitoring wells in Capitola and Aptos. Six companies bid on the project, with bids ranging up to \$249,416. The wells will be used to collect water quality data that can be used to determine if there is seawater intrusion into the coastal plain and if there is a groundwater overdraft.