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Water contamination risk said minimal

Panel downplays concern about JPL discharges

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ALTADENA — A NASA-assembled panel of six scientists and physicians largely downplayed concerns associated with past consumption of chemically-contaminated water dating from JPL's early days at a meeting Wednesday night.

During the 1940s and '50s, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, then under the U.S. Army Air Corps, disposed of contaminants from rocket testing in ground seepage pits, as was standard at the time. When JPL came under the newly formed NASA in 1958, the facility changed its disposal protocols.

But the toxic chemicals, including perchlorate and volatile organic compounds, remained underground and migrated in a southeasterly direction, eventually reaching water wells.

Perchlorate is thought to alter thyroid gland function and VOCs have been associated with various forms of cancer.

At the meeting, Thomas Mack, an epidemiologist at the USC Norris Cancer Center, presented the distribution of various cancers throughout the county. Within the area affected by JPL's contamination, his studies show that only prostate cancer shows evidence of an abnormal rate of occurrence. And that is "probably not related to JPL," he said. He added that a small number of cancer cases may have resulted from the groundwater seepage, but that there would be no way to identify those cases.

Several people at the meeting wanted to know if their thyroid conditions were related to the contamination from JPL.

Jerome Hershman, an endocrinologist from the UCLA School of Medicine, said perchlorate poses no health threat to humans at the low levels found in drinking water and leaves the body within a couple days after consumption. "To get (hypothyroidism), you'd have to probably take in an amount that is hundreds of times higher than that in drinking water," he said.

But measurements of perchlorate concentrations in wells only date back to 1997.

"I think there is still a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the answers we've received," said Barbara Benton, a resident of Altadena. "But we're still in the information gathering-stage and we're having dialogue, which is important."

Pasadena Water & Power has shut down nine of its wells since 1997, when the first unsafe levels of perchlorate, around 15 parts per billion, were detected in wells within the Monk Hill basin, which runs beneath Hahamongna Watershed Park and JPL. Two of those wells were reopened after the California Department of Health Services increased its recommended action level for perchlorate in drinking water to 6 parts per billion from the previously recommended 4 parts on March 11.

Construction of the first treatment system, located at the heart of JPL's campus, began in February. The multimillion-dollar plant should begin operation this summer, said Steve Slaten, Remedial Project manager.

Meanwhile, the federal government has yet to respond to a $2 million claim the city of Pasadena filed against NASA and the U.S. Army in January, seeking reimbursement for money the city lost through well-closure, said Ann Erdman, spokeswoman for the city of Pasadena.

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