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JPL toxic cleanup called complete

BY ELISE KLEEMAN
STAFF WRITER

LA CAÑADA FLINTRIDGE — Efforts to suck toxins from the soil of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Superfund site are complete, NASA has announced.

"This soil vapor extraction has been so successful that we see virtually no more volatile organic compounds being extracted," said Steve Slaten, the National Aeronautic and Space Administration's project manager.

Volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, most often come from cleaning solvents but also have many other sources including paints, pesticides and adhesives.

At JPL, they are concentrated at the campus' center, near the site of a waste pit used in the 1940s and '50s.

VOCs have been attributed to problems ranging from headaches to increased risk of cancer.

NASA's seven-year cleaning effort will — if indeed successful — keep the area's groundwater from being further polluted by the soils above.

Before it is officially considered complete, though, it will need the approval of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and state regulators. Slaten estimated that would take several months.

To clean the 15 acres of JPL's polluted soil, NASA used a special vacuum cleaner to suck air from three wells.

The vacuums — about the size of those used at car washes — drew the air through specialized carbon filters that trapped the toxins.

About 260 pounds of VOCs were removed from the soil, Slaten said.

"If there are any [VOCs] left in there, it should be in low levels that are tightly trapped by the soil," he said.

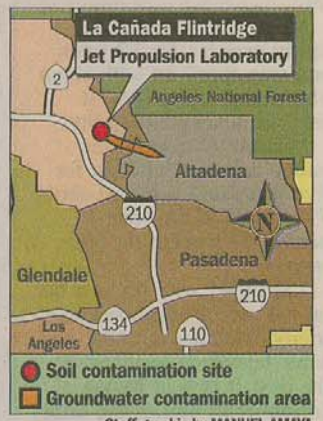
The equipment has been shut off for about a year already, he said, while the ground was monitored to detect any resurgence of chemical levels. No such rebound was detected.

The cleaning efforts at this Superfund site are far from complete, though. VOCs and another contaminant, perchlorate — a component of solid rocket fuel — still need to be cleaned from the groundwater.

A water treatment facility at JPL removed 560 pounds of perchlorate and 18 pounds of VOCs in the past year and a half. Similar treatment plants are in place at multiple water wells in Pasadena and Altadena; another well is planned in northwest Pasadena.

Slaten estimates those efforts will continue for another 18 years.

elise.kleeman@sgvn.com
(626) 578-6300, Ext. 4451



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