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Suit filed over contaminated Valley water

Plaintiffs
allege
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chemicals

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POMONA — Claiming five water companies knowingly distributed contaminated ground water to 12 San Gabriel Valley communities, nearly 100 plaintiffs filed a civil suit Tuesday asking compensation for illnesses and deaths they alleged were caused by drinking toxic chemicals.

The plaintiffs allege the companies — Suburban Water Systems, San Gabriel Valley Water Co., Southwest Water Co., California Domestic Water Co. and Covina Irrigation Co. — knowingly provided well water contaminated with three

cancer-causing chemicals and a fourth linked to thyroid disorders, according to the suit filed in Pomona Superior Court.

"I think we have very strong evidence that these polluters created the problem," said Barry Goldman, a Los Angeles attorney representing the plaintiffs.

The plaintiffs allege the five water companies and several other businesses — including Aerojet General Corp., Mobil Oil Corp., Huffy Corp. and Lockheed Martin Corp. — also named as defendants, negligently maintained their businesses and operations, resulting in the chemical contamination of the soil, air and ground water.

David Gionnotti, an attorney for
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THE PLAYERS

The Superior Court lawsuit filed Tuesday has numerous players:

- **PLAINTIFFS:** Roughly 100 people are suing, including some residents whose relatives died from cancer and diseases involving thyroid conditions.
- **DEFENDANTS:** Five water systems are named: Suburban Water Systems, San Gabriel Valley Water Co., Southwest Water Co., California Domestic Water Co. and Covina Irrigation Co.
- **CITIES:** The following cities are among those allegedly receiving contaminated water: Hacienda Heights, South El Monte, Irwindale, San Gabriel, El Monte, Glendora, Arcadia, Baldwin Park, West Covina, Rosemead, Azusa and Covina.
- **CONTAMINANTS:** According to the EPA, dangerous levels of trichloroethylene (TCE), tetrachloroethene (PCE), carbon tetrachloride (CTC) and perchlorate have been detected in local groundwater. Both TCE and CTC have been identified as probable human carcinogens.

WATER

Defendant describes lawsuit as frivolous

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Huffy Corp. and several other defendant firms, said he had not seen the lawsuit, but expects the litigation will slow down his clients' efforts to comply with the EPA's requests.

"I'm just generally concerned that people are stirring up controversy without information to support claims," he said.

Other firms mentioned could not be reached for comment.

The chemicals in question include the carcinogens trichloroethylene and tetrachloroethene, discovered in San Gabriel Valley ground water in 1979, leading the Environmental Protection Agency to declare certain areas Superfund sites for cleanup.

Subsequent investigations have uncovered another carcinogen — carbon tetrachloride — and, last month, perchlorate, which has been linked to thyroid problems.

"(These lawsuits) are significant because you've got hundreds and hundreds of people living in the San Gabriel Valley that have come into contact with contaminated water and there may be deaths," Goldman

The plaintiffs include Amanda Fernandez of Covina, guardian for Kristen and Lauren Santamaria, whose mother died of leukemia at the age of 44.

said. "There may be injuries. There may be diminution of the value of the property."

The plaintiffs include Amanda Fernandez of Covina, guardian for Kristen and Lauren Santamaria, whose mother died of leukemia at the age of 44. Other clients have suffered from cancer or thyroid conditions.

The 12 communities that allegedly received the contaminated water are Hacienda Heights, El Monte, West Covina, South El Monte, Glendora, Rosemead, Irwindale, Arcadia, Azusa, San Gabriel, Baldwin Park and Covina.

Defendants who could be reached for comment Tuesday denied the allegations.

David DeJesus, Covina Irrigation's general manager, called the contamination charges "frivolous." When TCE was discovered in 1979, the company ceased operations at its Baldwin Park wells, he said.

"In 1995, the wells were tested, and the results came back well below the health department standard," DeJesus said. "They have since remained below that standard." He suggested his company might have

been named in the lawsuit because it had at one time provided groundwater as a wholesaler to some of the other companies, including Suburban Water Company.

Frank Loguidice, vice president of engineering and operations for San Gabriel Valley Water Co., declined to respond specifically to the lawsuit.

"The San Gabriel Valley Water Co. has always complied and will continue to comply with all of the water laws and regulations set by the EPA and California Department of Health Services," he said. "And all of the water we serve meets all of the drinking water standards."

Ed Seidner, an Azusa property owner named in the suit, said the larger corporations have tried to pass the buck onto smaller businessmen.

"What's happening is the bigger companies are trying to suck everybody up to spread their costs around," he said.

Seidner said he did an environmental check for TCE when buying property on Azusa Avenue in 1989. Two years later, the EPA told him there had been TCE contamination.

Though the contamination could have come from a previous owner, EPA officials told him he would have to incur testing costs himself.

"Anybody who dumps on the ground and pollutes the water should pay for it," Seidner said. "But they're only holding me because I hold the deed to the property."

The plaintiffs are seeking "substantial" but unspecified damages and compensation for those who have suffered from the contamination — either from becoming ill or having a family member die.

They are also seeking the creation of a medical monitoring fund for people who are at high risk of disease from exposure and for damages related to the loss in property value because of the contamination.

The groundwater contamination issue has taken on a high profile in recent weeks. Environmental groups have run newspaper advertisements critical of water safety standards in the San Gabriel Valley, while water companies have run corresponding ads defending their water.

In Washington, D.C., Rep. Estaban E. Torres, D-Pico Rivera, who represents several of the cities named in the suit, has asked EPA Administrator Carol Browner to review water contamination levels in the San Gabriel Valley.

— City News Service contributed to this report.