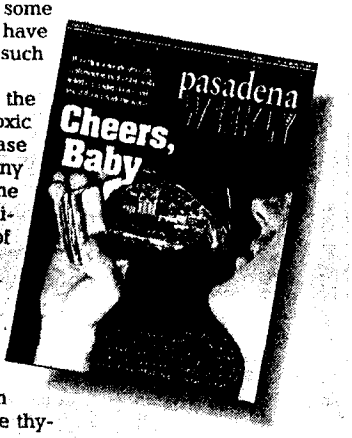
Feds: Drinking water safe around JPL

■ Study provided little information about explosive enhancing chemical perchlorate.

There is no present or future risks to the local drinking water that may have been exposed to contaminants dumped at or around Jet Propulsion Laboratory over the past six decades, according to a preliminary federal health study made public this week.

But officials with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services were unsure about some potential health hazards that have existed at the site in the past, such as those from perchlorate.



The report, prepared by the department's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, could not assess any potential danger posed by the explosives enhancing chemical, largely because of a lack of information.

Perchlorate, which now joins a host of potentially health damaging chemicals found in ground water supplies around the lab, was discovered last year. In certain doses the chemical may cause thyroid and other health problems.

Nearly half the drinking water supplied to Pasadena is drawn from the 40-square-mile underground Raymond Basin. The basin is fed by the Arroyo Seco, which runs past JPL at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Officials agree, no one is sure how to get perchlorate out of the water.

"There is so much that is unknown about perchlorate," said Ron Palmer, executive officer of the Raymond Basin Management Board. He said that when the health department was collecting data for this report "they were hesitant to include anything about perchlorate because there was so much they didn't know about it."

To date, only one local water well has been closed because of perchlorate contamination.

Although other area wells have been contaminated, they have not been closed. Instead the water has been blended with cleaner water and diluted to reduce the level of perchlorate.

In a nutshell, the health and human services report found no threat to public health in local water sources, largely because local water agencies constantly monitor wells for volatile organic compounds and other contaminants.

The presence of perchlorate, though, continues to raise questions.

For one thing, officials do not know how long the perchlorate had been in the water prior to testing.

"Perchlorate contamination presents an indeterminate past public health hazard because ground water was not analyzed for perchlorate until 1997," the report states.

Palmer has several other concerns about the health assessment report. "We certainly have reservations about some of the report's conclusions," he said. "The local water agencies have been handling the contamination very well to ensure the public's safety. But to say that there are no future risks is wrong."

The report states if contamination levels continue to rise that the amount of imported water would have to be increased. This is a red flag to Palmer.

"Increasing the amount of imported water is always a concern and raises questions. There's a limit to the water we can import from the [Metropolitan Water District], and economics is an issue as well," Palmer said. "Importing water is not a blanket solution."

Shan Kwan, chief engineer of water services division at the Water and Power Department, had not even known about the report until contacted this week by the Pasadena Weekly.

The final report will address public concerns and questions that are raised from now through Sept. 20. This process will conclude the public health assessment process for the JPL Superfund site.

— *Sophia Bicos*