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Pasadena could be forced to close more wells

By Gary Scott
STAFF WRITER

PASADENA — A perchlorate plume threatens to close more Pasadena water wells, and frustrated city officials say they have no choice but to treat the groundwater themselves and send the bill to NASA.

Nine city-owned wells have been closed since 1997, when perchlorate was first detected in the Raymond Basin aquifer. City officials say NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory is the source for the contamination.

A 10th well is beginning to show levels of the chemical contaminant, according to Pasadena Water and Power

officials, and may eventually have to be shut down if the plume is not halted.

"We believe that at this point we need to do something now to contain the perchlorate plume and then work out the responsibility and any potential reimbursement," said Phyllis Currie, general manager of PWP.

NASA has agreed to clean the four wells closest to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, but officials with the federal agency say more testing needs to be done to determine the source of the perchlorate found at the five other well sites.

"It is not an easy process to detect chemical flow and chem-

ical provenance, said Steve Slaten, remedial project manager for NASA. "We are currently undertaking a state of the art study."

If NASA is ultimately found to be responsible, Slaten added, "we will work with the city to find the best way to meet their needs."

Currie predicted the testing, which involves drilling a series of monitoring wells, will take "a couple of years" to complete.

In the meantime, she said the city is relying on groundwater from wells on the east side of the basin. She is afraid pumping too much water from there will draw the plume far-

ther eastward.

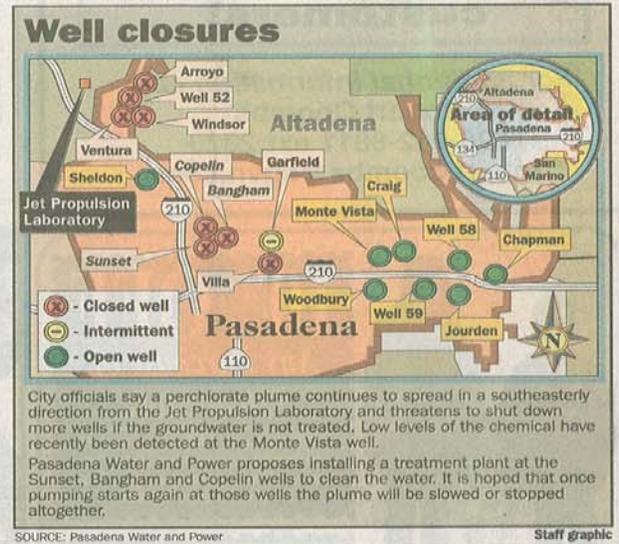
Perchlorate is a chemical used mainly in rocket fuel and dynamite production. It has been shown to inhibit the thyroid gland, causing developmental problems in newborns and tumors in adults.

Some city officials expressed surprise that NASA would question the source of the contamination. But Councilwoman Joyce Streater asked for clarification since the Sunset Reservoir is near the City Yards.

"We are sure that contamination is not from the yards?" she asked.

"We did not manufacture

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dynamite at the yards," answered Shan Kwan, business director for PWP.

The City Council on Monday approved \$800,000 to begin planning the treatment plant. The cost to buy and install the plant will be much more than that, she said.

Currie expects it will take the city a year to 18 months to get the proper permits from the state to build the plant.

"This is just the beginning

of a long project," Currie said.

City officials are anxious to begin treating the groundwater as soon as possible.

"The longer it goes the more it spreads," said Councilman Paul Little. "The more it spreads, the more it is going to cost to clean up the problem."

The city also risks further closures if the plume spreads. That would force PWP to import more expensive water from the state to make up for the lost groundwater, a cost that will be passed on to the customers.

"There is definitely a sense of urgency on the city's part to clean up the situation and make the wells usable again," said Mayor Bill Bogaard.

NASA is about a month away from opening a perchlo-

rate treatment plant on the JPL grounds that will use bacteria to eat away the contaminant.

The plant will clean about 125 gallons of water per minute, not enough to make a dent in Pasadena's water supply but hopefully enough to stop any further groundwater contamination.

Perchlorate has been leeching into the Raymond Basin aquifer for decades. The U.S. Army used to test rockets at JPL and would dump the chemical waste into pits on the property.

JPL was later turned over to NASA and the contaminated area was declared a Superfund site.

As part of NASA's cleanup effort, a larger, 7,000-gallon-a-

minute treatment plant is planned to clean water at the four city-owned wells in the Monk Hill basin. Slaten said it will take at least a year to get the plant up and running.

"Right now, California has a public health goal of 6 parts per billion" of perchlorate, Slaten said. "Our treatment plants will achieve that level or better."

Pasadena filed a claim against NASA and the U.S. Army earlier this year for costs associated with the well closures.

"We don't intend to back down," Currie said.

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