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Polluted water may hurt wells in Arizona

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Los Angeles Times
Apr. 7, 2005 12:00 AM

Arizona environmental officials are worried that a plume of polluted water under a Pacific Gas & Electric Co. facility near Needles, Calif., may be threatening drinking water wells on the Arizona side of the Colorado River.

Arizona's concerns, repeated as recently as last week in a letter to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, are complicating what is already a thorny problem for the utility and its parent, San Francisco-based PG&E Corp.

Pollution from PG&E's Topock natural gas compressor station in the Mojave Desert has created alarm at the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves Los Angeles and 25 cities and water agencies.

The Topock plant, which pushes natural gas through a pipeline from western Texas to markets in California, sits atop a pocket of at least 108 million gallons of water tainted with hexavalent chromium, a chemical compound that can cause cancer if inhaled as dust or steam.

The chromium 6 threat was at the center of the 2000 movie *Erin Brockovich*, which focused on a sister PG&E plant in the desert community of Hinkley, Calif., near Barstow. Chromium 6 was used at both plants and at a third station at Kettleman City in Kings County to control corrosion and mold in cooling towers. At Topock, PG&E dumped untreated wastewater in the ground from 1951 to 1969.

"The plume of hexavalent chromium may have already moved beneath the Colorado River and may now be contaminating Arizona's groundwater," Environmental Quality Director Steve Owens wrote to California officials on March 14.

Owens said Friday that he had no evidence of PG&E-generated pollutants migrating to Arizona. PG&E has offered to pay more than \$350,000 for a study of possible groundwater contamination in several communities on the Arizona side of the river.

Owens' latest letter was a response to a Feb. 22 announcement by California regulators that they detected high levels of chromium 6 in a monitoring well just 60 feet from the Colorado River.

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