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Scotts Valley groundwater contamination prompts 'alarm'

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Attempts to clean up a carcinogenic chemical that escaped from a dry-cleaning business lapsed in December, prompting a spike in groundwater contamination and a state order for immediate action.

A proposed solution will go before the Scotts Valley Planning Commission tonight, but Jill Duerig, general manager of the Scotts Valley Water District, wonders if enough is being done to protect the community's drinking water.

Tetrachloroethane, known as PCE, was found in April 2001 in a monitoring well and traced to Scotts Valley Cleaners in the Kmart shopping center on Mount Hermon Road.

Just 500 feet away is a well that produces 17 percent of the water for Scotts Valley Water District customers.

Yung Ku, owner of Scotts Valley Cleaners, said she switched to a nontoxic process from PCE three years ago.

"It's not a problem anymore," she said.

Duerig disagrees.

October samples from a monitoring well exceeded 2,000 parts per billion, well above the 5 parts per billion the state allows in drinking water.

Duerig said she was "appalled" no samples were collected in December and "alarmed" that the cleanup effort was suspended at the same time.

Another problem, she said, is that SECOR, the firm hired by the owner of the shopping center, installed three monitoring wells without consulting with water district staff.

Test results from those wells could be "deceptively low," Duerig said, because they are in locations where contamination is difficult to measure. She asked city planners to either order the three wells destroyed or require new ones.

SECOR engineer Chris Prevost said the lapse occurred because a 5,000-gallon storage tank for the contaminated water was near capacity and the company had not obtained permits required to dispose of the water.

The failure to pump out and sample the contaminated water constitutes a violation that could result in a \$1,000 a day penalty.

But staff of the Regional Water Quality Control Board told the Pratt Co., which owns the shopping center, that they would not seek a penalty if the company took steps to prevent a monitoring lapse in the future.

"It sounds all too familiar," said Sue Roth, president of the Manana Woods Mutual Water Co., which sued four big oil companies over MTBE contamination.

She suggested officials bring their concerns to the state Regional Water Quality Control Board, which includes Capitola resident Bruce Daniels and UC Santa Cruz professor Daniel Press.

"If it's not to the board, there's no teeth," Roth said.

The Scotts Valley Planning Commission will meet at 6 p.m. today at City Hall, 1 Civic Center Drive.

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