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Army investigates water contamination

TCE on former Fort Ord base may be migrating westward

By VIRGINIA HENNESSEY
Herald Staff Writer

The U.S. Army is expanding its investigation into the size of a toxic groundwater plume after discovering trichloroethene contamination in shallow test wells at the border between Armstrong Ranch and Fort Ord.

The contaminant, commonly called TCE, was previously identified in wells southeast of the Fort Ord-Marina border. The new discovery likely indicates the contamination is migrating west. The Army's next mission is to determine how far it has gone.

"There's been a more detailed investigation of the area," said Gail Youngblood, the Army's Base Realignment and Closure environmental coordinator. "That's not to say that it's not moving, because it probably is moving."

The Army and the company contracted to clean up the site have scheduled a public meeting for Wednesday to provide information about the findings and alert neighbors, particularly those on Quebrada Del Mar, to upcoming testing. The meeting will be from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Express, 189 Seaside Court, Marina.

"We want to make sure those people whose back yards abut the area know that what they see out their back doors is legitimate," Youngblood said.

She stressed that the location of the contamination is in the shallow aquifer, about 100 feet from the surface, and is blocked from moving into the aquifers that supply drinking water by a thick layer of clay, called an aquatard.

Drinking wells that supply Fort Ord draw water from 200 to 400 feet beneath the surface. Marina Coast Water District's wells pump water from a depth of about 900 feet. While the district's Well No. 12 is very close in proximity to the plume, Youngblood said, it is not in danger because it draws from a much deeper aquifer.

Derek Lieberman, an environmental compliance specialist for the Army, compared the aquifers to a layered cake. The contamination, he said, is in the top layer.

"It's 100 feet below ground surface, right on top of the aquatard, so it cannot migrate," he said. "The contamination is moving horizontally through the layer, but cannot move downward through the icing to the next layer."

The extent of the plume that has been identified to date is about 1½ miles from the coast, Youngblood said. The purpose of upcoming testing is to determine the western border through "non-detect sites."

The source of the plume is an area that was used as a fire drill site near the former Fritzsche Army Airfield, now the Marina Municipal Airport. In the 1950s, the earthen dam was filled with flammable chemicals and lit for Army firefighting practice.

The contamination was first detected in 1987 and is monitored quarterly. Testing in September and October identified TCE in a well southeast of the Fort Ord-Marina border. Testing conducted in December on two additional wells at the border also came back positive for TCE.

All three wells showed TCE in the 25 to 50 parts-per-billion range. The state of California's standard for public drinking water is 5 parts per billion.

Grant Himebaugh, who is tracking the project for the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, said the plume is the least threatening of the four toxic plumes identified on Fort Ord.

"To our knowledge it doesn't threaten any municipal water supplies. No TCE has been detected in any of the nearby municipal wells," he said. "This is probably the least threatening, in terms of health perspectives, of the four Fort Ord contamination plumes, in terms of size and concentration, the typical ways we measure health threats."

Dan O'Brien, chairman of the Fort Ord Community Advocacy Group, said he is not convinced by the official assurances. While drinking water may not be affected, he said, there are concerns about potential "off-gassing" of cancer-causing agents if the plume travels under houses in Monterey Bay Estates.

Additionally, he said, the plume will naturally travel downhill, which means out to the ocean.

"I think it's something of vital concern, as are all of these areas involving groundwater at Fort Ord," he said. "It's a big deal. People who live in the path of that plume need to ask questions and those questions need to be answered."

If you go • What: Public meeting concerning TCE contamination on Fort Ord and beyond. • When: 6:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesday. • Where: Holiday Inn Express, 189 Seaside Court, Marina. More information: Melissa Broadston, Fort Ord Cleanup Community Relations Office, 393-1284