

San Bernardino County Sun

House approves water bill

Proposal would provide anti-perchlorate money

By Scott Vanhorne

Staff Writer

Tuesday, April 12, 2005 - A bill that would provide millions to remove a rocket fuel chemical from local water cleared the U.S. House of Representatives on Tuesday.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Joe Baca, D-Rialto, must be approved by the Senate and signed by the president before the money flows. The measure cleared the House last year but stalled in the Senate, where lawmakers failed to act on it before adjourning.

The legislation, the Southern California Water Remediation Act, would provide \$50 million in an interest-bearing account to remove perchlorate from drinking water in cities such as Rialto, Fontana and Rancho Cucamonga that draw from the Santa Ana watershed.

Under the new version, the fund would sunset after 10 years and would require reauthorization to continue.

"I applaud the effort," Rialto Assistant City Administrator Kirby Warner said. "I hope we do get an opportunity to get a piece of that money."

Perchlorate coming from a former Lockheed-Martin Corp. plant in Mentone has affected Redlands, Loma Linda and Riverside wells, but the military contractor has spent millions to help providers clean up contaminants.

A pollution plume in northern Rialto that many blame on military contractors who worked there in the 1950s has tainted 21 wells in the Rialto-Colton groundwater basin. Water providers have received little help cleaning up the mess with the exception of \$4 million given by B.F. Goodrich, one of 23 companies the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board suspects may have released the contaminant.

West Valley Water District General Manager Anthony "Butch" Araiza said the federal money would help ease the burden of treating water to remove perchlorate, which costs more than \$1 million per well.

"I've been reluctant to go back to my ratepayers and have them pay for it because they didn't cause it," Araiza said.

Even so, he may ask for a rate increase this year to help pay for perchlorate treatment and to make up for about \$1 million in tax funding that the state will gobble up over the next two years.

Araiza, who has gone to Washington with other local officials to lobby lawmakers for perchlorate cleanup money, said he's not counting on the \$50 million just yet.

"It's kind of tight back there right now," he said. "That's why I don't know if Baca's bill will go

anywhere.'

If the bill passes, it will not provide enough money to solve all of the perchlorate problems in the watershed, said Kurt Berchtold, assistant executive officer at the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Some estimates put the cleanup cost in the hundreds of millions. A more precise figure is difficult because it's hard to say how long perchlorate will remain in the water supply, and no state or federal standards regulate the levels allowed in drinking water.

Staff Writer Lisa Friedman contributed to this report.