

Pasadena Star-News

Foul water forces drastic steps

Sierra Madre contamination to require \$2.8 treatment facility

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Thursday, April 14, 2005 - SIERRA MADRE -- The ongoing problem of contamination in Sierra Madre's water supply has led to an expensive last-ditch solution.

The city is preparing to spend \$2.8 million to build a water treatment facility on high ground behind Sierra Vista Park. The facility is necessary, city officials said, because contamination levels are continuing to rise.

"The writing is on the wall," Bruce Inman, public works director, said. "We are to a point where we're going to need to start treating that water."

So far, Inman stressed, toxins in the city's drinking water are within safe limits. But the levels of perchloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene, or PCE and TCE, have increased in two of the city's wells during the past six months. High concentrations of the chemicals affect the central nervous system. TCE also causes cancer in animals.

A third well is already shut down because of the toxins, which typically come from dry cleaning chemicals and paint. The fourth well is clean so far.

Sierra Madre gets about two-thirds of its water from the four underground wells.

The rise in toxin levels seems to correspond to the height of the water table, Inman said. As the water table has fallen during the past five drought years, more pollution has been measured in the water supply.

This winter's heavy rains have slightly raised the water table height and contamination has dipped slightly, but the overall trend is clear, Inman said.

"We're moving ahead with it. We can't really wait," City Council member Enid Joffe said.

The city is preparing a request-for-proposals to find a builder for the new facility. It will consist of about 10 large tanks, and work similar to a filter on a water faucet.

The city has money to spend, said Margie Tucker, assistant city manager and director of administrative services, because of a water bond issued in 2003. That bond was intended to pay for maintenance of the city's aging water mains.

"It is something that's going to compete with some of our other projects," Inman said. One of the city's largest projects, however, the Miramonte Reservoir replacement project, will continue as scheduled.

Construction on the treatment plant is expected to start in September and be completed by fall 2006.

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