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Cal-Am acknowledges water monitoring error

By **JONDI GUMZ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

FELTON — State records show a lapse by California American in monitoring Felton's drinking water in 2004.

Leslie Jordan, the company's water quality chief, confirmed Wednesday that a mistake was made and vowed "this will never happen again."

The error came to light as disgruntled Felton customers urge community members to support Measure W authorizing a 30-year tax to fund an \$11-million buyout of their water system.

Ballots were mailed Monday and must be returned by July 26 to the county Elections Department.

Drinking-water suppliers are required to test extensively and report findings annually to their customers in order to comply with state and federal regulations.

Cal-Am's 2004 report for Felton indicated customers got high quality water from Bennett Spring, Bull Spring and Fall Creek.

The company reported a coliform violation in February 2004, when two of five water samples tested positive; repeat samples were negative and so were samples for the rest of the year.

Another sampling problem was not mentioned. It showed up on the state Department of Health Services Web site, which said Cal-Am was delinquent in reporting tests for chemicals such as MTBE and benzene.

Most of the tests were due in February 2004.

Jordan, who works in Cal-Am's Monterey office, said the water was tested and no chemicals were detected, but the state did not accept the results because of sampling error.

Asked to elaborate, she said, "It wasn't preserved correctly," explaining how the water sample is chilled and preserved with an acid to reduce the pH. The preservative helps the sample last through shipping to a lab locally or in Belleville, Ill.

When the sample is not preserved correctly, and the pH is off, a resampling is supposed to take place. That didn't happen.

"It just fell through the cracks," Jordan said. "It's pretty unusual."

The state does not alert water companies when their reporting is delinquent.

"I wish they would," Jordan said.

Of the nine water systems she monitors from Monterey to Palo Alto, only Felton had a sampling problem, according to Jordan.

A few Felton samples due in 2003 were listed by the state as delinquent. Jordan attributed that to a problem in transmitting data electronically from the lab to the state. Samples due this year can be submitted any time before year's end, she said.

State health department spokeswoman Lea Brooks said the agency will address the issue of delinquent monitoring later this summer.

"DHS does not deem this failure to monitor to be a public health threat," Brooks said, because historically the Felton water system has not had any volatile organic chemicals.

Check the Web at <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/ddwem/EDT/monitoringschedule/default.htm>.

Contact Jondi Gumz at jgumz@santacruzsentinel.com.