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Perchlorate cleanup put in motion

By Eugene Tong, Staff Writer
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SANTA CLARITA - Local water agencies are stepping up efforts to clean up perchlorate a rocket fuel chemical left by the former Whittaker-Bermite munitions plant from local groundwater.

The Castaic Lake Water Agency, the region's prime water provider, has been working to secure the required state permits and a settlement from the defunct weapons manufacturer to contain the pollutant and to restore municipal wells that have been sealed since 1997 due to contamination.

Ken Petersen, engineering operations manager at CLWA, said the agency hopes to have the technical fixes in place by the end of 2006.

"We're putting together a plan and going through the CEQA requirements," he said. The agency board is slated to adopt the plan in September with a negative declaration no adverse environmental impact under the California Environmental Quality Act.

It's a two-step decontamination process. To contain the pollution plume, which has seeped into the Saugus Aquifer, officials plan to pump water out of two of the five capped wells for treatment a project estimated to cost \$6.1 million.

Officials also plan to restore water supply by digging two replacement wells away from the contaminated area, which could cost \$9.2 million.

To finance the cleanup, CLWA and three local water retailers have pressed the bankrupt munitions company for a legal settlement. A status conference is scheduled Sept. 8 in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles, with a mediation with the Whittaker-Bermite's insurers set later in the month. "As far as the cleanup plan, the overall plan we're concerned about is stopping the plume from spreading," said Bill Manetta, manager of Santa Clarita Water, a CLWA subsidiary involved in the lawsuit. "Hopefully, the defendants will be paying. If not, we're going to go ahead and recuperate the costs from the defendants."

Fred Fudacz, CLWA's attorney, said the ball's in their court. "There has been a level of frustration," he said. "We've kind of talked about terms of settlement. It seemed the parties got pretty close.

"It's a matter of convincing their insurers this is something they want to fund promptly. ... It's always a problem getting them to write the check. It just depends if we have to do it the hard way or the easy way. ... But one way or the other, we're going to get the money."

The hard way means taking the case to trial currently set for June 2006.

For nearly 50 years, Whittaker-Bermite used the 996 acres off Soledad Canyon Road to build and test dynamite, Sidewinder missiles and small rockets used during World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Cold War.

Manufacturing operations concluded in 1987, but the site is contaminated with various chemical compounds, including perchlorate, heavy metal and solvents that have migrated into the valley's

groundwater system. Four municipal wells were shut down in 1997 after tests revealed high concentrations of perchlorate, and another well was capped in 2002.

Perchlorate in large doses may interfere with thyroid function, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment deemed water with as much as 6 parts per billion safe to drink.

CLWA designed the cleanup process with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Whittaker-Bermite contributed some \$5 million to the study.

Meantime, the rainstorms from January have allowed perchlorate to seep into a shallow well east of Bouquet Creek and the Santa Clara River. The well operated by the Valencia Water Co. has been removed from service.

The well tested at about 10 parts per billion, and treatment could begin this fall, said Bob DiPrimio, Valencia Water's president. The proposal has undergone CEQA review, and the state Department of Health Services is processing the permits. Whittaker-Bermite is contributing \$500,000 to the effort.

"We're on schedule to have the treatment online by October," DiPrimio said. "We're still on that schedule."

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