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Panel to investigate contaminated water

By Mike Cruz, Staff Writer

BEAUMONT - A committee has been formed to investigate a spike in nitrate-contaminated water in Cherry Valley and seek out alternative water sources in the San Gorgonio Pass.

Preliminary reports indicate the boost in nitrate levels could be from on-site disposal systems, or septic tanks, in Cherry Valley, which is in the Edgar Canyon area. Water is drawn from wells in the canyon by the Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District and Bonita Vista Water Co.

Nitrate concentrations in wells serviced by the district have increased over the years including a recent temporary significant spike but still remain below the nitrate drinking water standard of 45 milligrams per liter, according to an Aug. 10 letter from the San Timoteo Watershed Management Agency to the Regional Water Quality Control Board, Santa Ana Region.

Nitrates in Bonita Vista's wells may have reached 35 milligrams per liter.

"Nitrate concentrations in BCVWD well No.16 are usually low, but have gradually increased over time. Recently, this well exhibited a sudden increase in nitrate concentration that exceeded the nitrate drinking water standard," wrote J. Andrew Schlange, general manager of the watershed management authority.

The yearlong study, to be conducted by a committee of the watershed management authority, will reveal the exact cause of the nitrate spikes, determine alternative sources of water and give local officials a better idea of how much groundwater is available. The study also will look at a future salt mitigation fee and permits for water recycling.

"What we're doing is making sure we have a long-term, clean water supply," said Alan Kapanicas, Beaumont city manager. Alternative water sources will be needed to provide water for the rapidly growing region in the coming decades, he said.

Officials from the city, the San Timoteo Watershed Management Authority and the Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District discussed the study at a City Council meeting this week. The council agreed to provide half of the \$400,000 needed to perform the study, and the city's share will come from local impact fees.

The other half of the cost will come from the Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District.

Kapanicas said, as far as he knew, the city's water did not pose a health risk to residents. "If there were (a risk), we would have to start purifying the water. And if we did have to start purifying, the price of water would go up," he said.

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Chuck Butcher, general manager of the Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District, said he has seen a significant spike in nitrates at two wells over the last several months. One of the wells has operated at half of the maximum acceptable level since March, he said at the meeting.

If the study reveals nitrates are a widespread problem, the agencies suggested that a ban on new septic tanks in incorporated and county areas be considered. Councilman Roger Berg said Beaumont could consider a rule to only allow annexation from applicants who connect to the sewer system.

"In an accumulated effect, (the nitrates) could have a significant impact on groundwater quality," said Schlange, of the watershed management agency. Other Southern California water agencies will be watchful of the study results, he said.

"This is a regional issue. What we find here will affect other agencies," Schlange said.

A mobile home park called Plantation on the Lake, at 10961 Desert Lawn Drive, in the county area of Calimesa, recently requested water service from the Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District because nitrate concentrations in their well may have exceeded the standard, Schlange said in the letter. The park uses a septic tank that appears to have contaminated its own well.

Kathi Berman, owner of Sunny Cal Egg and Poultry in Calimesa, owns property that has a pure water well, and she is licensed to be a private water source. Berman said she was concerned about the nitrates and supported the study.

"Our concern, with regard to the study, is the septic tank issue," Berman said.

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