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Carrier Corp. to clean toxic groundwater

Firm responds to area contamination

By Shirley Hsu, Staff Writer
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INDUSTRY -- An air conditioning manufacturer has agreed to pay nearly \$28 million to clean contaminated groundwater in the San Gabriel Valley after years of not complying with a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency order, authorities said.

Carrier Corp., which spilled cancer-causing chemicals into the groundwater under Industry and parts of La Puente and Walnut, will spend \$26.5 million to install wells to pump out contaminated water and stop it from spreading, the EPA announced Monday.

In addition, Carrier Corp. will spend nearly \$470,000 to help with a restoration project on the former duck farm purchased by the Watershed Conservation Authority last year for use as a natural area. It also will reimburse the EPA \$800,000 and pay a \$125,000 penalty for failing to comply with the cleanup order. Carrier's parent company, United Technologies Inc., was also listed in the settlement.

"It's unfortunate that it took them so long, but we're really pleased they're settling at this point," said Kathleen Salyer, EPA spokeswoman.

Carrier spokeswoman Margaret Gan-Garrison said the company has already spent \$22 million "over and beyond" the settlement money to install groundwater extraction wells to clean up water from the "substantial accidental release" that happened 20 years ago.

"Basically we are quite pleased that we have managed to resolve the issue through the settlement," she said.

Salyer said the EPA's priorities are to contain the 6.5-mile-long plume of polluted water to keep it from spreading. The cleanup will take years, she said.

Carrier Corp. was one of the major polluters of groundwater at the Puente Valley Operable Unit Superfund Site, one of four areas in the San Gabriel Valley declared Superfund sites by the EPA, Salyer said.

The company spilled tetrachloroethylene (PCE) and trichloroethylene (TCE), which the EPA said are carcinogenic and are used in industry for degreasing metal parts. It spilled between 8,000 and 20,000 gallons of PCE in 1984.

When the EPA ordered the company to pay its share of a \$50 million cleanup project in 2001, it refused to cooperate, according to the EPA. But in the last year and a half the company started coming to the table, Salyer said.

Grace Burgess of the San Gabriel Valley Water Quality Authority said she hoped the EPA and Carrier would work with her organization and local water purveyors to make the water safe enough to drink.

She said the Water Quality Authority was willing to help financially to do that.

"The groundwater aquifer provides water for more than a million people," she said. "Let's clean this up, take it up to level of drinking water standards."

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