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Deal on tainted water made with Goodrich

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About 30 protesters picketed a meeting Wednesday night at which BF Goodrich, accused of contaminating the groundwater of hundreds of thousands of residents of Rialto, Fontana and Colton with perchlorate, hammered out a settlement with the regional water board.

The deal, signed in the Rialto Council Chambers, requires Goodrich to drill between five and nine wells in the area in the next 10 months to monitor the path of a seeping underground perchlorate plume. It also requires the formation of an oversight committee composed of community members and activists, and that others responsible for the contamination be pushed to pay for replacement water.

Members of the Riverside-based Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice and the Los Angeles-based Environment California as well as local residents said the agreement lets Goodrich off easy, and the 10-month time frame has loopholes that could allow the company to drag its heels for years before consumers see any benefits.

"Testing is good. The problem is this agreement treats testing like it's an end in itself," said Sujatha Jahagirdar of Environment California. "We think it's a recipe for indefinite delay."

Perchlorate, thought to cause thyroid malfunction, is used in the manufacture of munitions, fireworks and rocket fuel.

It has been detected in wells in Rialto, Fontana, Colton and county areas served by the West Valley Water District. Each water purveyor has wells shut down due to perchlorate contamination or is treating wells to remove the pollutant.

Its presence in the area is thought to date back to World War II. The Defense Department and a myriad of other contractors and corporations have allegedly contributed to the problem, including Goodrich.

The city of Rialto is suing Goodrich, the Defense Department, San Bernardino County and dozens of other "potentially responsible parties" for the contamination.

"Goodrich has entered into a consent order agreement to assess water quality in the immediate area of the 160-acre site" that the company operated on from 1957 to 1963, said Goodrich spokeswoman Gail Warner in a statement.

"Goodrich intends to continue its assistance in addressing these issues despite ongoing litigation among the water purveyors and (potentially responsible parties)," Warner said.

Davin Diaz of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice said this agreement isn't enough.

"Any settlement that doesn't include replacement water, as far as we are concerned, is null and void," Diaz said.

Replacement water could come in the form of wellhead treatment or even distributing bottled water for drinking.

Kurt Berchtold is assistant executive officer of the Santa Ana River Water Quality Control Board, the other party to the agreement with Goodrich.

He defended the agreement, emphasizing that consumers aren't drinking water laced with perchlorate now. Water purveyors are either treating contaminated well water or taking polluted wells off line altogether.

Berchtold said the monitoring wells are an essential step in eventually solving the perchlorate problem. He said Goodrich has been cooperative in the past, and in 2003 gave \$4 million to the area water purveyors for wellhead treatment.

"We think the investigation required by the agreement is necessary before an effective replacement-water or cleanup program can be put in place," Berchtold said.

Berchtold also said he believes the 10-month schedule is appropriate, and that Goodrich faces fines of \$100,000 per month if the work drags on.

Rialto Councilman Ed Scott, a delegate to the perchlorate proceedings, said last week he was skeptical about the settlement.

"If the water board were to give them 10 months, I want the water board to hold their feet to the fire," Scott said. "BF Goodrich needs to clean our water up now."