

Test wells showing more contamination in South San Jose

By Susan Yoachum
Staff Writer

Evidence of spreading chemical contamination near a drinking-water well in South San Jose has prompted the drilling of a series of new wells by Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp., months after officials thought the contamination had been controlled. No new drinking water has been found to be affected.

But a state water-quality control official said the latest wells, including one at an elementary school, have been drilled out of concern that the chemicals are moving underground toward a well belonging to the Great Oaks Water Co., which supplies drinking water to 16,500 homes in South San Jose.

Another Great Oaks well, No. 13, was closed in December 1981 after Fairchild found that one of its underground chemical-storage tanks was leaking. Well No. 13 was found to contain higher-than-acceptable

Contamination rising in South S.J. test wells

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levels of 1,1,1 trichloroethane, a cleaning solvent used in Fairchild's semiconductor-manufacturing process.

Since that time, Fairchild has dug up the leaking tank, excavated the contaminated soil adjacent to the tank and drilled test wells to monitor the contamination.

But in the months since, officials have found that, despite the cleanup efforts, levels of contamination in test wells have been increasing, not declining, as they had hoped.

The latest wells are designed to determine how close the contamination has come to Great Oaks well No. 4, one of 10 uncontaminated wells from which the water company draws its supplies.

Peter Johnson, an engineer for the state Regional Water Quality Control Board, said drilling the test wells was "prudent" to determine how widespread the contamination is. "We did not have an adequate definition" of how far the chemicals had traveled.

Officials were unable to say Wednesday how much the levels of contamination had increased.

Amanda Hawes, one of the attorneys representing a group of residents that is suing Fairchild and Great Oaks over the contamination of well No. 13, said the latest drilling raises "serious questions."

"If they're drilling wells more than a year after they first discovered that chemicals had escaped from a container, it raises serious

questions about the competence of those trying to clean up this inexcusable public disaster," Hawes said.

Johnson defended the Fairchild cleanup, saying that "in any cleanup, you cannot be absolutely sure about the whereabouts of every single drop" of contamination.

Johnson praised Fairchild for its foresight in installing an "early-warning system" in the form of the original monitoring wells.

Fairchild spokesman John Salazar said that a well that is being drilled at the San Anselmo School "will be part of the ground-water monitoring system for the area."

"The well will not affect the drinking water of the school or the area," Salazar said. "Rather, the well will help ensure the quality of

drinking water in South San Jose." Salazar said Fairchild has drilled approximately 85 wells for testing and cleanup since the contamination was found.

Betty Roeder, president of Great Oaks Water Co., said Great Oaks tests its wells almost daily to make sure customers are not receiving chemically polluted water.

She declined further comment because of a lawsuit Great Oaks filed last month against Fairchild.

Fairchild has estimated that it will spend about \$12 million to clean up the contamination. Salazar said no date has been projected for ending the cleanup operation in which the contaminated ground water is pumped to the surface and cleansed through carbon filters.

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