

Officials fear spread of well contamination

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contamination has reached seven more private wells and may have spread more than a half mile beyond well No. 8.

Official concern also has increased in the six weeks since state and county health officials learned of new scientific evidence that one of the chemical contaminants — 1,1,1 trichloroethane (TCA) — causes cancer in laboratory mice.

"I expect I will be sending out more letters recommending that people not drink the water as more results come in," said Steve Brooks, Santa Clara County environmental health sanitarian.

Brooks already has recommended that a private well serving the Town and Country Mobile Home Park, where 400 people live, be closed. Wells serving two other mobile home parks have shown traces of contamination but are still considered within safe limits.

IBM has drilled nearly 250 test wells as much as 1½ miles from its huge complex on Cottle Road in an effort to determine the extent of the contamination. But officials are uncertain whether IBM is solely responsible for the contamination.

Harold Singer, toxics division chief of the state Regional Water Quality Board office in Oakland, said that although leaks of IBM chemicals in 1980 and 1981 are a likely source of the contamination, they are not necessarily the only source.

TCA could have been used as a cleaner for septic tanks in the area or as a degreasing solvent by other, smaller businesses, he said.

"In general, we do believe most of the off-site contamination is due in part to IBM," Singer said.

But Singer said officials are "not going to rule anything out at this point" in their search for the source of the contamination — with one exception.

That exception is Fairchild

Camera and Instrument Corp., only two miles away. An underground chemical leak discovered in 1981 at Fairchild led to the widely publicized closure of another public well, Great Oaks No. 13, and the pollution of a handful of privately owned ones.

But because Fairchild is downstream of IBM, officials are certain that Fairchild's chemical leak cannot be the source of the underground water pollution surfacing west of IBM.

They are less certain of just how large an area the problem does cover.

"It could be the leading edge of a heavily contaminated area, or it could be a localized problem," Singer said.

That is why IBM has drilled more than 200 wells on its property and is in the process of drilling 40 off-site wells, according to IBM spokesman Dick O'Connell. "We have questions that need answering," he said.

"If you look at all the wells and what's been used in the vicinity, you can't say there's the source 'x' and there's the source 'y,'" O'Connell said. "If you look at a well that's near the Cottle Road site, you can say that probably came from the (IBM) plume."

Between them, IBM and Fairchild have punched almost 400 holes into a 2-square-mile area of South San Jose. A landscape that was once graced by fruit-laden trees now resembles a small oil field, with large well pumps and generators interspersed among homes, businesses and the remaining orchards.

But the chemical concentration levels being found in the wells near IBM are substantially lower than the chemical levels found in the wells closed by the Fairchild spill.

Some of them are so low, in fact, that health officials were not concerned until they learned of the new scientific report linking TCA to cancer.

The new scientific data, published in a preliminary report of the federal government's National Toxicology Program, led sanitarian Brooks to recommend that four of the 10 contaminated private wells be closed, including the Town and Country Mobile Home Park well. The three others are owned by individuals.

Brooks also is closely watching the test results of water samples from wells at the Magic Sands and Rancho Santa Teresa Mobile Home Parks and the Southside Community Center and wells owned by individuals.

So far, Brooks said, those wells have shown far less than the 5 parts-per-billion level of TCA that he considers to be of concern.

John Garbini, manager of Rancho Santa Teresa, said Brooks assured him last week that chemicals in the park's water were below recommended limits, and Bill Dediego, manager at Magic Sands, said once-a-week testing has shown that water to be safe.

"If we have any problem, all I have to do is turn the key, and we go straight to city water," Dediego said.

The state health department's recommended limit for TCA in drinking water had been 300 parts of TCA per billion parts of water. But state officials suspended that recommended limit after the new federal test results were published. State health officials are now reviewing the federal researchers' data to determine whether a new recommended level should be set.

Betty Roeder, president of Great Oaks Water Co., voluntarily took well No. 8 out of service a year ago even though the amount of TCA in it was only a fraction of the 300 parts per billion allowed at the time. A few months later, she took well No. 2 out of service, even though it showed only trace amounts of TCA and somewhat higher levels for Freon. The state has established no recommended limit for Freon in drinking water.

More tainted water in wells near IBM

By Susan Yoachim
Staff Writer

A second case of widespread underground water pollution from industrial chemicals in South San Jose has left two public drinking wells and 10 private wells serving at least 2,000 people contaminated with a chemical suspected of causing cancer.

Officials have been aware of contamination near IBM Corp.'s huge complex on Cottle Road for more than a year. One of the public wells, Great Oaks No. 8, was taken out of service a year ago. Another public well and three private wells have been reported tainted since then.

But only recently have officials determined that the

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