

13 Mountain View wells contaminated by TCE

By Ruthann Richter and Ann Gibbons
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About 120 homeowners in Mountain View's North Bayshore area were warned Tuesday by the Santa Clara County Health Department not to drink water from their private wells because some had been contaminated by toxic chemicals.

Tests last week of about 13 private wells in the area turned up the highest levels of the toxic solvent trichloroethylene (TCE) found in drinking water in the county to date, said Steve Brooks, hazardous materials program coordinator for the county. TCE is a highly toxic solvent known to cause cancer in mice.

There is no contamination, however, of public drinking water supplies in Mountain View, said Norm Lougee, the city's water division engineer. Dozens of alarmed residents have called the city today to find out if the city's water supplies were contaminated.

"It's a nightmare here. We're getting a call every three minutes," Lougee said. "People are climbing the walls, worrying about their water."

"The public drinking water supply is fine." The TCE showed up in 8 of the 13 private wells at levels ranging from .02 parts per million to 2 parts per million. The state Department of Health Services considers anything above .005 parts per million — or 5 parts per billion — unacceptably high. The Environmental Protection Agency, however, has proposed in its most recent Recommended Maximum Contaminant Levels that zero amounts of TCE be allowed in drinking water supplies. The proposed standard has not been adopted yet.

TCE and another chemical found in the well water, dichloroethylene, are solvents widely used by the electronics industry to remove grease from computer chips. TCE irritates human eyes at concentrations as low as 5 parts per million and causes damage to the liver and other organs after chronic exposure. Dichloroethylene also has been shown to cause cancer, liver and kidney damage in animals.

As a precautionary measure, Giansiracusa said all residents in the area bounded by the Bayshore Freeway, Sterlin Road, Charleston Road and Permanente Creek were given hand-delivered letters Tuesday warning them not to drink their well water.

"The (TCE levels) are not so high that I expect any of these people to have symptoms or be ill," Giansiracusa said. "I don't know if they're going to be affected at all. Nobody knows if these low levels cause trouble. They may, so certainly we don't want anybody drinking the water."

It was the second time the county has warned a large group of residents not to use local well water and the first time the county has found such high levels of TCE in the water, according to Steve Brooks, hazardous materials program coordinator for the county. The first incident was in 1979 in San Jose where TCE leaked from an underground tank at the Fairchild Instrument & Camera Co. plant into water supplies.

The county, in cooperation with a private consulting firm, this week is continuing to test private wells in Mountain View, eventually checking each one. There are about 50 wells concentrated in the three-square-block area, Giansiracusa said.

Most residents of the semirural area have avoided drinking the well water for years now because it has smelled and tasted bad, Lougee said.

About 10 years ago, the city hooked up one-third to one-half of the homes in the neighborhood to its water system because the well water was so poor, Lougee said. Many residents drink bottled water, although a few interviewed today say they have been drinking the well water for years despite the problems they have heard about it.

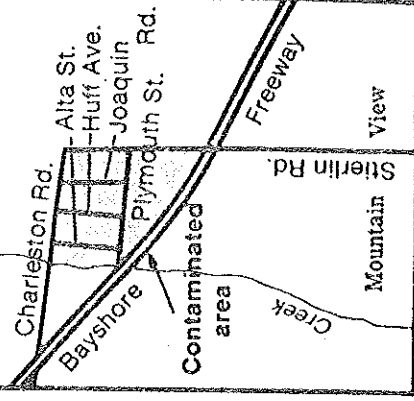
"The water in general has been bad-tasting for as long as anybody can remember," Lougee said.

Herb Knoebel, of 1029 Alta Ave., said he has known for a long time the water is bad, but he drinks it and cooks with it anyway. He has spent \$3,000 on a water softener because he does not like the water's "sulphur" taste.

Sal Perino, who has lived 997 Alta Ave. since 1929, said he stopped using the well water a few weeks ago and switched to the public water supply because his wife wanted better water to wash their clothes. He thinks the water tastes fine.

Frank and Eleanor Clark, 1022 Joaquin Road, drink the well water because the bottled water is too expen-

Contaminated wells



Times Tribune graphic

sive.

In some cases, Lougee said, the water may have been fouled because of improperly drilled wells inadvertently drawing from the area's aging septic tanks. The county is testing for possible coliform bacteria contamination.

The source of the TCE contamination is thought to be in the industrial area near Terra Bella Avenue, just across the Bayshore Freeway. The area is now populated with electronics industries, though there have been other industries there in the past.

TCE was commonly used in industry until six or seven years ago, when it was added to the list of suspected carcinogens.

The solvent often has turned up in tests by federal, state and county investigators who monitor the valley for groundwater contamination. In Mountain View alone, six companies have been found in the past two years to have TCE on their property due to underground tank leaks, Lougee said. The companies include Intel Corp., Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp., Raytheon Corp., Teledyne Semiconductor, NEC and Siltec.

The San Francisco Bay Area Regional Water Quality Control Board said the contamination of the private water wells was found after the board's routine survey of industries in the county found that Teledyne had stored TCE and other organic solvents in underground tanks, according to Steve Heikkila, water resources control engineer.

The company no longer stores TCE underground. In cooperation with Teledyne, the regional water board drilled test wells in the region and found TCE.

The county then tested the private drinking water wells in the area this month and found the concentrations of TCE.

The regional water board, meanwhile, is conducting a survey of other industries in the area to see if TCE could have leaked from their plants into the water supplies.