

IBM cleanup plan OK'd

Regional water quality board overrules protests

The San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board voted Tuesday night to approve a plan for cleaning up ground water contamination linked to the IBM plant in south San Jose.

The 6-1 vote came after a parade of elected officials, environmentalists and residents attacked the plan, arguing that even small amounts of toxic chemicals are unacceptable in drinking water.

Those who drafted the proposal — the staff of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board — were

joined by IBM and the state Department of Health Services in defending the plan. Ted Smith, chairman of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said his group would appeal the decision to the state Water Resources Control Board.

The controversy over the plan centers on one key element: The regional water board's staff recommended that IBM not try to contain or eliminate low levels of the solvents Freon 113 and trichloroethane (TCA) from water wells and ground water

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IBM cleanup plan is approved

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supplies in the northern loop of the figure-eight shaped spread of the contamination. That loop is north of the intersection of Capitol Expressway and Monterey Road.

The company would be required to continue to monitor private and public wells in the area to detect any increases in the contamination in that northern loop. But water board officials, IBM and the state Department of Health Services maintain that the levels of the solvents are so low that it would not be worth what it would cost to remove them.

H. Ray Kerby, manager of environmental programs for IBM in San Jose, added that his company is confident that "the public drinking water supplies being questioned . . . are safe. Therefore, in our judgment, the suggested installation of filters on public wells in that area is not needed for the protection of public health.

However, those who opposed the plan said that TCA is a suspected carcinogen and, until more evidence is made available on its health effects, it should be treated as such.

"Our residents do not accept the notion that we must be exposed to possible health risks while research on toxic chemicals is still being conducted," said Santa Clara County Supervisor Susanne Wilson. "We do

not believe in civil liberties for toxic chemicals."

Wilson was joined by Mayor Tom McEnery and Pat Ferraro, a member of the Santa Clara Valley Water District, in asking the regional water board to delay its decision for a month to further study the possibility of treating well water in the northern loop to remove the chemicals before they are pumped into the distribution systems.

Mike Belliveau, research director for Citizens for a Better Environment, said his estimates indicate that IBM could set up and operate carbon filter systems on eight particular wells in the northern loop for 10 years for a cost of about \$4.7 million.

Peter Johnson, a staff engineer for the water board, responded that the board does not regulate municipal water wells and wouldn't review the merits of the carbon treatment plan unless directed to do so by the state Department of Health Services.

Pat Sacco, a woman who lives in the northern loop, said of the water board's concern over its lack of authority, "I am tired of being a canary in these situations, in all of these situations . . . I believe that if the regulations say that we don't have the right to clean the water then we ought to change the regulations."

But Dick McMillan, a regional engineer with the department's sanitary engineer-

ing branch, made it clear that his agency would make no such demands.

McMillan also recited a list of research that pointed to the lack of evidence that TCA is a cancer-causing agent.

However, Pat Lamborn, program director for the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, criticized McMillan's choice of studies. For example, Lamborn said, he read from one study that concluded that TCA does not cause cancer in male or female rats.

However, Lamborn said that same study also concluded that TCA caused cancer in female mice.

The state action level for TCA is 200 parts per billion, but most of the wells that the toxics coalition is concerned about have TCA concentrations of less than five parts per billion.

Earlier Tuesday, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a resolution opposing the IBM plan.

The board suggested that the water board and the state Department of Health Services conduct a six-month study of ways to eliminate toxic contamination of drinking water caused by the IBM spill.

Gary Burke, director of government relations for IBM, criticized the board for making its objections "just eight hours" before the hearing.

Slight contamination found in wells

By Fran Smith
Mercury News Staff Writer

San Jose Water Co. ground water supplies, a main source of drinking water for 700,000 residents in San Jose, Campbell, Los Gatos, Saratoga and Monte Sereno, contain some chemical contaminants — but not enough to pose health hazards, test results released Tuesday show.

Water samples from 141 wells on the company's 38 well sites had no hazardous chemicals. Seven wells, which had slightly contaminated water, nevertheless met state and federal safety standards.

Water in only one well exceeded state recommendations. That well has not been pumped since 1980, said George Adrian,

the company's manager of water quality.

"It's noteworthy that the domestic ground water basin is as clean as it is," Adrian said. "On the other hand, we're not pleased that there's any contamination at all."

A state law that took effect last January requires all community water systems to test their wells for the presence of 158 hazardous chemicals. The San Jose Water Co. conducted its analyses between June and November.

Once it evaluates the firm's results, the state Department of Health Services will recommend a testing program.

The contaminants found were trichloroethane (TCA), tetrachloroethylene (PCE) and Freon.

The state health department says water may safely contain up to 200 parts per billion of TCA; San Jose Water wells contained a maximum of 28 parts per billion. Water is considered safe with up to 4 parts per billion of PCE; at most, San Jose's water had one-fourth that amount. The state has not recommended a limit for Freon.

Adrian said he believes a toxic chemical spill at IBM caused contamination at two wells, one on Tully Road and one just south of it.

Company officials are trying to pin down the source of contamination at the other wells, but have no plans to clean them up, Adrian said.