

3 tainted wells are found in South San Jose area

By Maline Hazle
Staff Writer

Three wells in South San Jose are showing traces of toxic contamination that could be part of a spreading chemical spill from IBM Corp. discovered four years ago.

Drinking water from two wells owned by the San Jose Municipal Water System showed concentrations of 1 part per billion of 1,1,1-trichloroethane (TCA), an industrial cleaning solvent. Tests of the third well, owned by the San Jose Water

Co., showed a concentration of 2 parts per billion. Officials of San Jose and the water company say that the most likely source of the toxic chemical is the IBM spill, but they are not certain.

Although none of the wells is now being used, all three may be reactivated within the next few months. They are "peaking wells" that are used only during dry, summer months. The city wells have been closed since January and the water company well was shut down last September.

"It's probable that ours will be reopened," said William Lo Conte, water systems engineer for the city. "We'll continue testing, but the state told us it's OK."

"We might reactivate our well," said Dick Balocco, spokesman for the San Jose Water Co. "If we need it, we probably will. We haven't made up our minds."

The wells were among those tested after a stormy meeting of the Santa Clara Valley Water District's board of

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directors six weeks ago.

At that meeting, board vice president Joe Donohue complained that the state Department of Health Services has failed to spell out what levels of industrial chemicals are safe in drinking water.

TCA is a degreasing solvent that can cause damage to the central nervous system, the liver and the cardiovascular system if taken in large doses. It also can cause loss of coordination, eye irritation and dizziness, and is a suspected liver carcinogen.

For TCA, the Environmental Protection Agency recommends no more than 1,000 parts per billion as an acceptable level. The state health department recommends 300 parts per billion and the county health department suggests 5 parts per billion.

Readings in the three wells, at 1 and 2 parts per billion, were at a point that Lo Conte called the "lowest detectable level."

But some citizens insist that any chemical contamination, no matter how slight, is too much.

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"Our position is that people should not be subjected to drinking water with anything in it," Smith said.

Smith was irate that officials waited until recent weeks to test the wells, which are located along

Senter Road and near the intersection of Capitol Expressway and Highway 101.

"Something that really bugs me is that it's taken so long to figure this out, knowing for as long as we have that this is where the spill is moving to and not having monitored it," he said.

IBM has spent an estimated \$20 million in attempts to clean up the TCA, which leaked from underground chemical storage tanks as long as six years ago.

But Peter Johnson, an engineer for the state Regional Water Quality Control Board, estimates that the leak now has spread through the aquifers at least 2½ miles beyond IBM's Cottle Road plant and is moving north toward Coyote Creek at five to 30 feet a day.

However, both Lo Conte and Balocco said some doubt exists as to whether their wells were contaminated by the IBM leak.

"Whether we can conclusively say it's from IBM, I don't know," Lo Conte said. "We'll continue to monitor it to see if it's from some other source."

Balocco said it is "impossible to say" whether the contamination is related to the IBM spill.