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More wells fouled

Toxic leaks taint 46 in Santa Clara County

By Mitchel Benson
Mercury News Environment Writer

The number of Santa Clara Valley drinking water wells contaminated with industrial solvents has more than doubled in the past three years — from 19 to 46 — an increase that raises questions about how well industry and government are cleaning up toxic leaks.

Regulators and the high-tech industry — mainly computer and semiconductor manufacturers — continue to spend millions of dollars to stem the underground flow of chemicals from an estimated 100 operating and abandoned manufacturing plants. But pollution continues to spread farther and farther from the industrial sites.

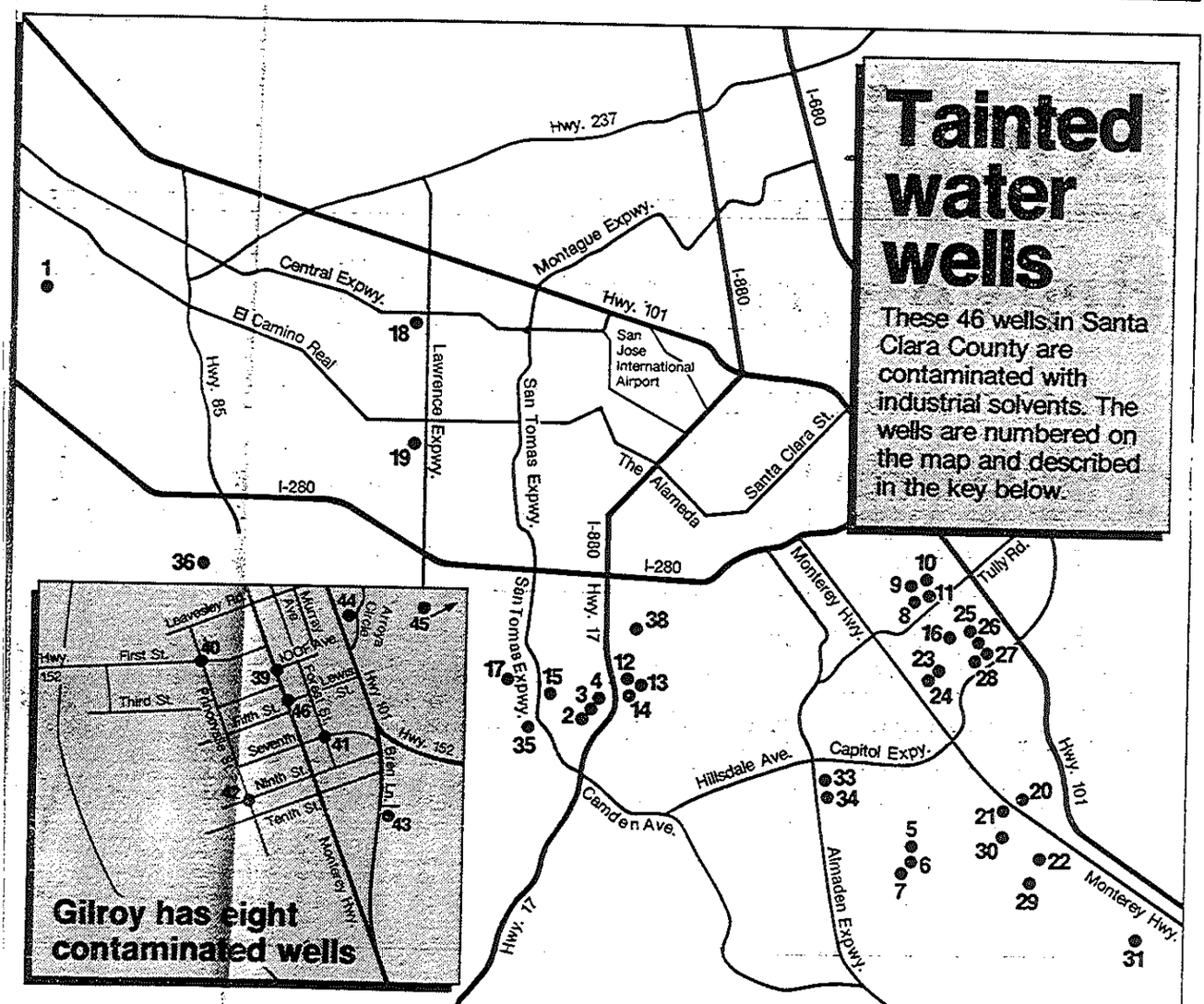
In most cases, the chemicals have leaked from underground chemical waste storage tanks and plumbing that cracked, rusted out or otherwise failed.

State health officials say 11 of the 46 wells have been shut down or disconnected. Virtually all others are tainted with extremely low levels of toxic industrial solvents, far below the "action levels" that health officials say pose a risk to the public. Environmentalists are more concerned about that contamination.

See WELLS, Back Page

Tainted water wells

These 46 wells in Santa Clara County are contaminated with industrial solvents. The wells are numbered on the map and described in the key below.



Gilroy has eight contaminated wells

These are the chemicals found in the 46 wells and their action levels:

carbon tetrachloride — 5 ppb
chloroform — 100 ppb
1,1 DCE (1,1-dichloroethylene) — 6 ppb
1,2 DCE (cis-1,2-dichloroethylene) — 16 ppb
Freon — 18,000 ppb
PCE (tetrachloroethylene) — 4 ppb
TCA (1,1,1-trichloroethane) — 200 ppb
TCE (trichloroethylene) — 5 ppb
<= less than

Contamination is measured in parts per billion, or ppb. One ppb is roughly equal to one ounce of chemical in eight million gallons of water.

In most cases, contamination in the wells is far below the unenforceable state "action levels" for certain chemicals. When the chemical exceeds that action level, the state recommends that water suppliers either clean out the contamination or stop using the well.

Water suppliers point out that people who live near a contaminated well may not get their water from it. Concerned residents are asked to contact their local water supplier to find out the source of their water.

1. **Los Altos #110** Ca. Water Service; Hillview & Eleanor Aves.; carbon tetrachloride (3.8 ppb)

2. **First St. #1**** San Jose Water Co. (SJWC); S. First St. & Central Ave.; TCA (6.2 ppb), 1,1 DCE (0.3 ppb)

3. **First St. #2**** SJWC; S. First St. & Central Ave.; TCA (5.7 ppb), 1,1 DCE (0.4 ppb); chloroform (5.5 ppb)

4. **First St. #3**** SJWC; S. First St. & Central Ave.; TCA (26.7 ppb); 1,1 DCE (1.4 ppb), PCE (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

5. **Blossom Hill #3** SJWC; Blossom Hill Rd. & Dunsburry Way; TCA (0.5 ppb)

6. **Blossom Hill #4** SJWC; Blossom Hill Rd. & Dunsburry Way; TCA (0.6 ppb)

7. **Blossom Hill #5** SJWC; Blossom Hill Rd. & Dunsburry Way; TCA (0.5 ppb)

8. **Tully #1** SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (1.2 ppb), Freon (1.2 ppb)

9. **Tully #2** SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (3.2 ppb), Freon (3.6 ppb)

10. **Tully #3** SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (0.6 ppb), Freon (0.9 ppb)

11. **Tully #4** SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (1.1 ppb), Freon (1.1 ppb)

12. **Ridgeley #1*** SJWC; Ridgeley Drive & Campisi Way; TCA (2.5 ppb)

13. **Ridgeley #2*** SJWC; Ridgeley Drive & Campisi Way; TCA (4.0 ppb)

14. **Ridgeley #3*** SJWC; Ridgeley Drive & Campisi Way; TCA (2.3 ppb)

15. **San Tomas #2*** SJWC; San Tomas Expwy & W. Campbell Ave.; PCE (<0.5 ppb)

16. **Senter #1*** SJWC; Senter Park; TCA (2.4 ppb), Freon (3.4 ppb)

17. **Springfield #1*** SJWC; Springfield & Memphis Drives; PCE (<0.5 ppb)

18. **Santa Clara #20-02** City of Santa Clara; 2990 Semiconductor Ave; 1,2 DCE (0.6 ppb)

19. **Santa Clara #24** City of Santa Clara; 3709 Swallow Way; TCA (0.6 ppb), Freon (1.8 ppb)

20. **Ivy Well**** Rancho Santa Teresa Mobile Home Park; 5101 Monterey Hwy.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

21. **Chapel Well**** Rancho Santa Teresa Mobile Home Park; 5101 Monterey Hwy.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

22. **Magic Sands #1**** Magic Sands Mobile Home Park; 165 Blossom Hill Rd.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

23. **Carribbee #1**** Carribbee Mobile Home Park; Senter & Lewis Rds.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

24. **Carribbee #2**** Carribbee Mobile Home Park; Senter & Lewis Rds.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (<0.5 ppb)

25. **Evergreen #2** City of San Jose; Capitol Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (0.8 ppb), Freon (0.8 ppb)

26. **Evergreen #3** City of San Jose; Capitol Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (1.5 ppb), Freon (1.0 ppb)

27. **Evergreen #4** City of San Jose; Capitol Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (0.7 ppb), Freon (0.5 ppb)

28. **Evergreen #5** City of San Jose; Capitol Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (2.1 ppb), Freon (1.7 ppb)

29. **Great Oaks #2**** Great Oaks Water Co.; Bangor Ave. & Calpine Dr.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (1.2 ppb)

30. **Great Oaks #8**** Great Oaks Water Co.; Chynoweth and Lean Aves.; TCA (7.4 ppb), Freon (16 ppb), 1,1 DCE (<0.5 ppb)

31. **Great Oaks #13**** Great Oaks Water Co.; Great Oaks Blvd. & Via Del Oro; TCA (6-8,800 ppb)

32. **Redwood Mutual #1*** Redwood Mutual Water Co.; Bayview and Virdelle Drives; TCA (2.8 ppb), chloroform (2.9 ppb)

33. **Bryan #4** SJWC; Almaden Expwy & Bryan Ave; PCE (1.3 ppb)

34. **Bryan #2** SJWC; Alamden Expwy & Bryan Ave.; Freon (0.7 ppb)

35. **Virginia #3** SJWC; Virginia & Rincon Aves.; TCA (3.0 ppb)

36. **Blackberry Farm** Blackberry Farm Golf Course; chloroform (0.8 ppb)

37. **Oakmont Mutual #1** Oakmont Mutual Water; Idylwild Dr.; TCE (0.7 ppb)

38. **3 Mile #3** SJWC; Bascom Ave. & Stokes St.; TCA (0.8-2.0 ppb)

39. **Gilroy #1** City of Gilroy; Monterey St. & IOOF Ave; TCA (1.1 ppb), PCE (1.4 ppb)

40. **Gilroy #2** City of Gilroy; 1st & Princevalle Sts; TCA (0.5 ppb), PCE (2.3 ppb)

41. **Gilroy #3** City of Gilroy; Forest St., near Old Gilroy; TCA (1.9 ppb), PCE (1.2 ppb)

42. **Gilroy #4** City of Gilroy; 9th & Princevalle Sts.; TCA (0.7 ppb), PCE (0.6 ppb)

43. **Gilroy #6** City of Gilroy; end of Brem Lane; TCA (0.5 ppb), PCE (0.8 ppb)

44. **Gilroy #7** City of Gilroy; Arroyo Circle; TCA (2.4 ppb), PCE (1.2 ppb)

45. **Deep Hole #1** Deep Hole Water Association; Ferguson Road & Godfrey Ave.; PCE (1.5 ppb)

46. **Ca. Canners & Growers #06B02** Ca. Canners & Growers Association; Lewis St & Monterey Hwy; PCE (1.65 ppb)

*Standby wells that are used only during peak demand conditions.
**These wells have been shut down or disconnected. Great Oaks #13 has been destroyed.
In addition, water pumped from one well — California Water Service's Los Altos #110 — is being treated to reduce the contamination. All others are regularly in use.

Sources: San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, Ca. Department of Health Services, Santa Clara County Department of Public Health

More contaminated wells found in Santa Clara County

WELLS, from Page 1A

They say those action levels are imprecise, and that chemicals even in such low concentrations can threaten pregnant women, infants and others in special conditions.

"I knew things were getting worse. But I was surprised it's gotten as bad as it has as quickly as it has," said Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "The danger is that more and more wells will be affected."

The cause of the problem, Smith contends, is a regulatory agency — the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board — that is understaffed and unable to carefully supervise the cleanup work at each of the contamination sites. As a result, industries can do just the minimal work and spend the least amount of money necessary to clean up their properties.

The regional board's own records show that of the 93 cleanup jobs in the South Bay, 55 are behind schedule, 32 are on schedule and only six are ahead of schedule.

People needed

"If we had some watchdog agencies that really did have some teeth and did have enough people to be on top of all this," Smith said, "they could be setting some deadlines and then enforcing them."

Of the 46 wells found contaminated, 36 feed water systems that serve 200 or more customers. Water officials say the 36 wells represent a small percentage of the estimated 300 wells that pump into the valley's 16 large systems. As a result, they do not threaten the companies' abilities to supply enough water.

> "The question is how far you can go with more staff."
>
> — *Steve Morse, engineer*

The 10 other contaminated wells are only a fraction of the hundreds of wells that officials estimate feed the many small public systems that serve five to 199 customers.

Industry representatives and public water suppliers say the increase in contaminated wells is not necessarily an indication of spreading ground-water pollution. Rather, they say, more wells have been found to be contaminated because the valley's water supply is under more intense scrutiny. And they say most companies are spending as much as they can and working as hard as they can to clean up their contamination.

Problem there

"If you look for the problem, we're going to find it," said Jacqueline Bogard, director of the Santa Clara County Manufacturing Group's Clean Water Task Force. "We here in Santa Clara County looked to fix our problem and we found one."

Bogard also said industry is not the lone culprit when it comes to the use of chemicals that can seep into underground water supplies. For example, private individuals still are permitted to use highly toxic industrial solvents to clean out their septic tanks.

She and others agree that the regional board needs more help to monitor and supervise industry's cleanup efforts.

"He (Smith) is pretty much on line. . . . Yes, more staff would help along those lines," said Steve Morse, supervising engineer for the regional board's South Bay Division. "The question is how far you can go with more staff, and being able to find experienced people that will take the workload."

Currently, nine engineers and two supervisors handle all 93 investigations and about a dozen potential cases in the South Bay. The staffers supervise as few as six or as many as 20 cases, depending on their experience.

If an engineer has one particularly complex and time-consuming case, Morse said, "the others aren't getting very heavy-duty attention. Some get picked up by the supervisor and some just get put off to the near future."

As a result, it is not always a company's fault that it is falling behind a timetable established by the regional board. And when some companies do fall behind, Morse said, it does not always make sense to "get tough," because enforcement actions can take time and money away from the actual cleanup.

Smith disagreed. He said the key to protecting even more wells from contamination is for the regional board to get even stricter with deadlines for when a business must contain or stop the spread of contamination.

Under the current system, regional board records show, businesses since the mid-1980s have removed 83 underground tanks, 30,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil, seven piping systems and one concrete vault.

The cleanup efforts are a long and expensive process. After a business identifies a leak, it must define the extent of contamination — how much chemical has leaked and how far it has spread. Then comes the key step of containment, in which wells or underground walls are installed to stop the flow of the contaminants. This involves the costly disposal or treatment of tainted soil and water.

The companies that own and operate drinking water wells are left with the responsibility of regularly testing the water for contaminants. And some have increased the frequency of well tests from the state-mandated annual tests to as often as once a month.

More contamination

Scott Yoo, water quality manager for the San Jose Water Co., said that such stepped-up testing efforts are bound to uncover more contamination.

Even Yoo — whose company has the most contaminated wells, 20 — said he did not want to play down the possibility that more wells are being tainted as plumes of underground chemical contaminants continue to float away.

"I know that there are over 100 sites being investigated," he said, "and I know they haven't defined all of the plumes. When things become present in ground water, things start spreading."

Ironically, the regional board's elaborate computer data base — created with the help of an $800,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — cannot say how many or which sites have contained the spread of pollutants.

"Containment is a major, major step. It's the most significant step in the whole process," acknowledged Richard McMurtry, a senior engineer for the water board. "Perhaps that's something we should be putting in (the computer). That's probably something we should put in there to make it more accessible."

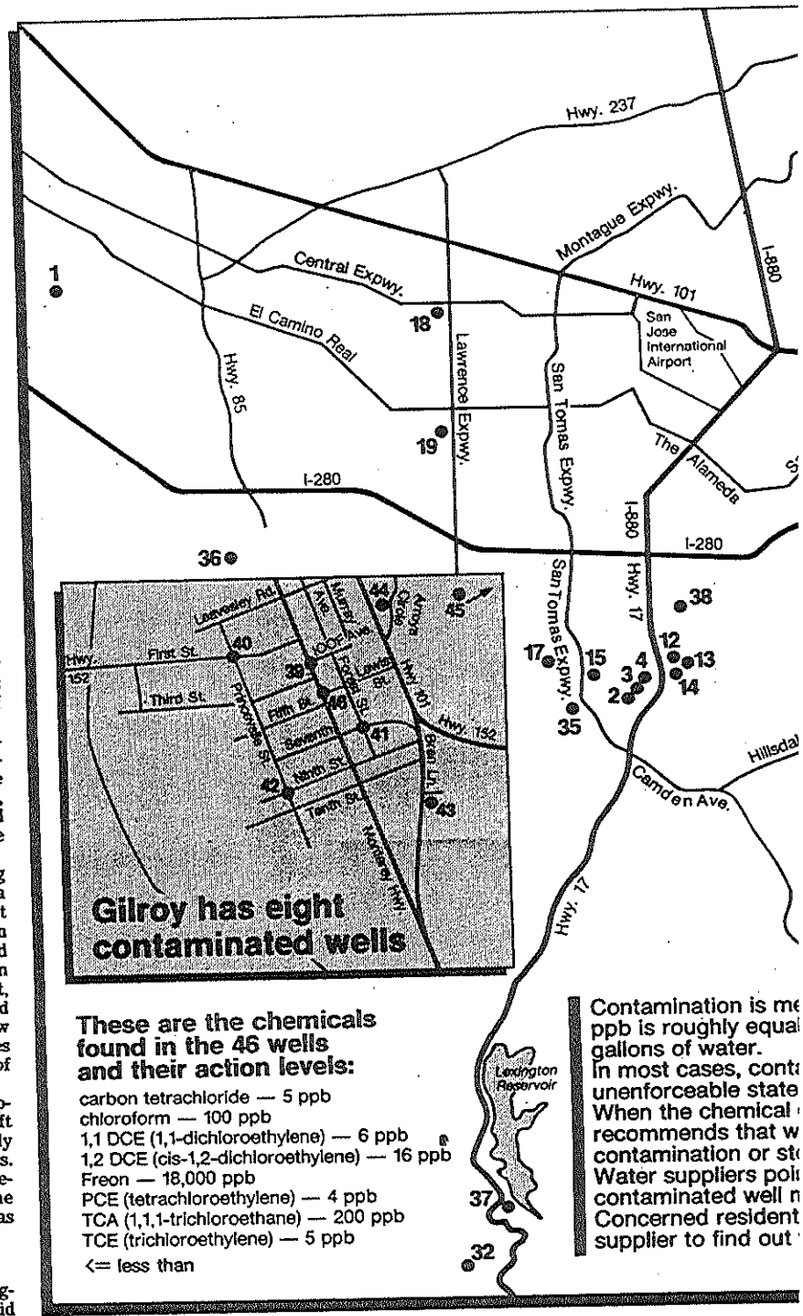
Some contained

Regional board records indicate that some sites have been contained, but the details are not all that encouraging.

For example, the contamination has been contained at only four of 19 Santa Clara Valley sites that originally were proposed for the federal Superfund cleanup program. They are International Business Machines and Fairchild Semiconductor Corp., both in South San Jose; Van Waters & Rogers in San Jose; and Applied Materials Inc. in Santa Clara.

Other sites, including both Advanced Micro Devices and Signetics in Sunnyvale, once were considered contained but recently discovered contamination shows that more work needs to be done.

Morse insisted that soon there will be more progress toward containing contamination at an additional four or



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7. **Blossom Hill** #5 SJWC; Blossom Hill Rd. & Dunsburry Way; TCA (0.5 ppb)
8. **Tully** #1 SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (1.2 ppb), Freon (1.2 ppb)
9. **Tully** #2 SJWC; Tully Rd. & Galveston Ave.; TCA (3.2 ppb), Freon (3.6 ppb)
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28. **Evergreen #5** City of San Jose; C Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (2.1 ppb), Fre ppb)
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30. **Great Oaks #6**** Great Oaks Wa Co.; Chynoweth and Lean Aves.; TCA (7.4 ppb), Freon (16 ppb), 1,1 DCE (<0.

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Other sites, including both Advanced Micro Devices and Signetics in Sunnyvale, once were considered contained but recently discovered contamination shows that more work needs to be done.

Morse insisted that soon there will be more progress toward containing contamination at an additional four or five sites. That's because many are just now installing wells that will be used to pump up contaminated water.

"A lot of sites are putting in wells," he said. "We'll see a significant jump ahead (in containment) in the next six months."

13. Ridgeley #2* SJWC; Ridgeley Drive & Campisi Way; TCA (4.0 ppb)

14. Ridgeley #3* SJWC; Ridgeley Drive & Campisi Way; TCA (2.3 ppb)

15. San Tomas #2* SJWC; San Tomas Expwy & W. Campbell Ave.; PCE (<0.5 ppb)

16. Senter #1* SJWC; Senter Park; TCA (2.4 ppb), Freon (3.4 ppb)

17. Springfield #1* SJWC; Springfield & Memphis Drives; PCE (<0.5 ppb)

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28. Evergreen #5 City of San Jose; Capitol Expwy & Tuers Rd.; TCA (2.1 ppb), Freon (1.7 ppb)

29. Great Oaks #2** Great Oaks Water Co.; Bangor Ave. & Calpine Dr.; TCA (<0.5 ppb), Freon (1.2 ppb)

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44. Gilroy #7 City of Gilroy; Arroyo Circle; TCA (2.4 ppb), PCE (1.2 ppb)

45. Deep Hole #1 Deep Hole Water Association; Ferguson Road & Godfrey Ave.; PCE (1.5 ppb)

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'Action levels' for toxics in water are unenforceable, controversial

The so-called "action levels" for toxic chemicals in drinking water are among the most controversial and disputed numbers in gauging risks to public health.

In California, the levels are unenforceable guidelines that state and local health officials use to determine when chemicals are approaching unsafe levels in drinking water.

In most cases, the levels are based on studies that exposed laboratory animals to toxic chemicals. That system raises two concerns: whether the right animals were used, and whether researchers accurately extrapolated effects on humans from the effects on the animals.

Health officials are always quick to point out that thalidomide, a drug that was found to cause birth defects in humans, showed no such effects in early laboratory tests on rats and mice. Follow-up tests on rabbits indicated the problem.

"But given what we know, and what we have to work with, it's the best we have," said David Spath, who heads the state Department of Health Services' chemical standards and technology unit.

For chemicals that are considered cancer-causing, action levels are based on limiting the risk of getting cancer to one case out of 1 million people who drink 2 liters of tap water a day over 70 years. Two liters is equivalent to one large plastic soft drink bottle.

For chemicals that are not considered cancer-causing, there is no specific risk target like one in a million. Instead, action levels usually are based on avoiding detrimental health effects in an individual who, during his or her lifetime, drinks 2 liters of water a day.

One San Jose area water supplier — Great Oaks Water Co. — has a policy of not using wells that show any detectable concentrations of contamination from industrial chemicals, even if the levels fall below state action levels.

"What right do I have to cause a cancer in one out of a million people?" Betty Roeder, the president of Great Oaks, told the Mercury News in August. "If it's bad stuff, I don't want it. Period. That's my thinking."

— Mitchel Benson

Elsewhere in the Mercury News

Governor's schools plea

Gov. George Deukmejian, who has been criticized for inadequately supporting schools, on Saturday urged the California Republican Party to make education a top priority.

State News, Page 1C

High-tech leasing

Instead of purchasing, many businesses and some individual users are choosing to pay a monthly fee to use a computer temporarily until the excess work is completed.

Computing, Page 1F

Kosher mountains

Two current films, "Dirty Dancing" and "Sweet Lorraine," revive memories of the mountains of New York and Pennsylvania where Jewish folk went in the summer.

Arts & Books

Nevadan survives lightning strike

CARSON CITY (AP) — A Carson City man was hospitalized after being hit by lightning near the state capitol.

Brad Wunsch, who works at the Employee Security Department in the Capitol Complex, had walked outside on a break when it started to rain and took shelter under a tree. A lightning bolt hit the tree and the charge passed through Wunsch, entering at his waist and leaving through his ankles.