

Water pollution spreading in the Valley

ENVIRONMENT: DWP says \$850 million cleanup is needed or it will have to stop drawing altogether from local wells.

By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer, Posted: 07/02/2010 08:22:51 PM PDT, Updated: 07/02/2010 10:02:59 PM PDT



Department of Water and Power, Assistant Manager of Operations, Kathie Hirata walks next to a series of carbon filters that treat the well water at the Tujunga Spreading Grounds in Sun Valley, Calif. (Dean Musgrove/Staff Photographer)

A plume of toxic chemicals under the San Fernando Valley has expanded so much in recent years that city officials have had to close dozens of water wells and may have to stop drawing local water altogether unless a massive \$850 million cleanup effort is undertaken.

The plume of contaminated water has now grown to about 2 miles wide and 7-10 miles long, and the Department of Water and Power has been forced to close a growing number of wells, said Pankaj Parekh, the DWP's director of water quality.

In 2007, the DWP only had to shut down one well

because of contamination of the city's only local water supply. Today, 50 to 55 are shut down at any given time in the North Hollywood and Rinaldi-Toluca well fields.

As a result of the closed wells, the annual amount of money DWP has had to spend to import water has increased from \$7.3 million in 2007 to \$174 million now.

"It's a big problem, but whatever investment we make in this – whether it comes from Congress, a bond or our own communities – the return on it will more than adequately compensate the city," Parekh

said.

Without the investment, he said, the city may have to stop drawing water from Valley wells within the next five to 10 years.

The DWP is drafting plans to build an \$850 million treatment complex to rid the water of the cancer-causing cleaning solvents, including Chromium 6, used by aerospace and related industries in the 1940s and '50s, Parekh said. The agency hopes to fund the complex through a water bond that state officials are considering placing on the ballot.

The need for local groundwater has risen sharply in recent years as supplies from outside the city have tightened.

DWP gets 13 percent of its water from the aquifer, 37 percent from the California Aqueduct, 1 percent from recycled water and the agency buys 49 percent from the Metropolitan Water District.

But the Colorado River, which supplies the MWD, and the Sacramento Delta, which feeds into the aqueduct, have been increasingly limited in recent years because of rising demand, drought and new environmental restrictions.

"We cannot be guaranteed of those supplies into the future," Parekh said. "We no longer have the luxury to rely on purchasing water to make up for our own water loss."

But if the local groundwater can be cleaned up, he said, the city should see reduced costs for its water supplies.

Earlier this week, the Los Angeles County grand jury raised concerns about contamination in the basin due to the improper storage or handling of hazardous materials by the aerospace and related industries. The report noted that DWP had closed 54 of its 115 wells in the Valley in late 2009.

"Of the remaining 61 wells, 44 had recorded various contaminants above the maximum levels set by the California Department of Public Health," grand jurors wrote. "LADWP projected that within five years, water from the (San Fernando Basin Aquifer) would be unavailable if there is no cleanup."

Parekh said the DWP makes sure the water delivered to customers is within the safe levels.

"However, that doesn't mean the quality of the water in the ground, if it was not managed by us, is safe," Parekh said. "That water needs treatment of some sort. So we either shut the wells down, or treat it to

take contaminants out."

The aquifer spans most of the Valley floor, holding about 3.2 million acre-feet of water, or enough to supply the entire city for five years.

The effort to clean up the contaminants began in 1986, when the federal Environmental Protection Agency designated the aquifer a Superfund site.

Fred Schaufler, Superfund section chief for the EPA's Pacific Southwest region, said the agency has Superfund treatment facilities in North Hollywood, Burbank and Glendale.

"We treat the water to meet all drinking water standards and then provide it to those cities," Schaufler said. "The cities operate the facilities and blend it with the rest of the water supply before it's delivered to the customers."

Last fall, Schaufler said the EPA upgraded the North Hollywood plant to expand the amount of water it can treat and prevent contaminated supplies from migrating toward the DWP wells.

"The amount we pump for North Hollywood is relatively small compared to what DWP needs to pump for the water supply needs in the Valley," Schaufler said. "That is why they are going out on their own to handle the larger volume of water they need while we're focused on containing the existing contaminated groundwater and seeking to remove the contamination from the aquifer."

In recent years, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board has reviewed thousands of businesses that may have used chromium, and has issued cleanup orders against several. Some of the bigger polluters included local aerospace firms.

But Ken Harris, interim assistant executive officer of the board, said most of the money provided by the EPA for the program has been spent and the board is trying to obtain a new funding agreement.

"Within the resources we have, we want to try to identify the responsible parties and require them to clean up any pollution they are responsible for related to Chromium 6," Harris said. "It's a multiagency effort. Everybody is very concerned about it and we are trying to – within the resources we have – to address the problem."