

EPA moves to clean up chemicals spreading through West Side

Increased groundwater use is moving the pollution at a rate of 10 acres a year, and the EPA wants public comments on how best to clean it up.

By Tony Davis
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Chemical pollution spreading from a now-closed electronics plant threatens future groundwater supplies for the booming West Side, city officials say.

And city officials are growing increasingly worried about what could happen if the pollution is not cleaned up.

The pollution is moving at the rate of 10 acres a year, city officials say, from the old Sparton Technology Inc. electronics plant on Coors Road near Irving Boulevard Northwest.

It's moving rapidly because as the area grows, more water is pumped from nearby wells, officials say. In turn, that speeds the flow of groundwater through the sands and soils of the underground aquifer, according to City Hall.

On Thursday, the federal Environmental Protection Agency will take public comments on the best way to clean up trichloroethylene, or TCE, and other chemicals under the Sparton plant.

"One of the biggest problems is that the pollution is spreading rapidly and the groundwater is moving rapidly because Albuquerque is pumping so much of it," said Norman Gaume, chief of City Hall's Water Utility Division.

Since 1983, city and state officials and Sparton have been aware of the pollution.

According to a new memo from Gaume, the contamination is moving up to 10 acres a year

SPARTON HEARING

Topic
Proposals to clean up groundwater pollution near Sparton Technology Inc. site on the West Side.

Place
Cibola High School, 1510 Ellison

Time
7 p.m., with open house starting at 5 p.m.

Review
Case documents are available to the public at Taylor Ranch library, 5700 Bogart N.W.

Please see **CHEMICALS/A8**

to the northwest. It's dropping more deeply into the aquifer, but it's not clear how far, the city says.

TCE concentrations of up to 400 times the federal drinking standard of 5 parts per million have turned up in monitoring wells not far from the Sparton plant site, Gaume said. The nearest city and private water-utility company wells are three miles from Sparton, according to Gaume.

Thursday's hearing could intensify ill will between Sparton and city and state officials over a pollution cleanup that has gone nowhere. The bad feelings stem largely from repeated written Sparton statements that the pollution carries no major threats to city wells.

Or, it could be a step leading toward a relatively painless cleanup, if officials and Sparton agree on a plan. State Environment Department officials say they've heard more conciliatory words from Sparton recently.

On Monday, a Sparton attorney declined to spell out his company's stance.

"Our belief is that the issues would best be resolved in another way than in the news media," said Sparton attorney Jan Appel from his company's Jackson, Mich., corporate office. "You get to finger-pointing, you get to positions where the emotions are louder all the time."

EPA will weigh seven alternatives for ridding the soil of the colorless, odorless pollution. The choices range from a zero-cost, "no action" plan to a \$15.63 million scheme to introduce bacteria into the soil to decompose the toxic compounds, which include the suspected cancer-causing chemical trichloroethylene.

In between are several proposals to spend \$6 million to \$7 million to pump the contamination directly out of the ground. Most of the plans will require 30 years of cleanup.

The EPA last fall stopped taking public comment on a previous plan, to give Sparton more time to respond.

In November, Sparton wrote the EPA that the company "is very concerned that the threats to human health that EPA believes are posed by the groundwater impacted by Sparton's operation are unrealistic and not supported by objective information."

Sparton has asserted that the pollution is moving slowly and is dissipating naturally. Citing what it says are statements in city and state documents, Sparton says there is little chance the city soon would use the contaminated groundwater, if it became clean.

City officials have denounced such statements.

In September, Mayor Martin Chavez wrote EPA Dallas-area Regional Director Jane Saginaw, urging "prompt and effective action to begin a cleanup."

On Monday, Gaume said that if a cleanup doesn't start soon, West Side residents could lose in two ways.

First, the 90 acres where groundwater has been polluted lie in the heart of an area where officials someday hope to drill for additional water. It's one of few areas near Albuquerque that a State Engineer's Office task force has OK'd for future drilling, Gaume said.

Second, the state Bureau of Mines and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation have identified the Calabacillas Arroyo just north of Sparton as one of two good potential spots for artificially sinking and recharging water into the aquifer. Contamination could ruin this as a recharge area, the city says.

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