

Team studying source of Rialto-area water contamination gets funding

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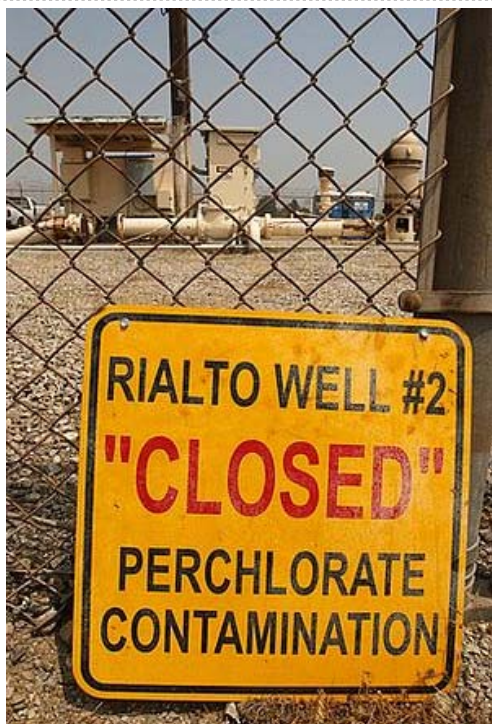
By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Federal money will fund work by the U.S. Geological Survey to determine the source and movement of an underground plume of perchlorate in the Fontana-Rialto area that also threatens water wells serving the city of Riverside.

Officials with the Fontana Water Co. -- determined to find out who is fault for the contamination -- sought the \$262,000 from a research arm of the Department of Defense, water company spokesman Rick Ruiz said. The company wants the responsible party to pay for water treatment now funded by district ratepayers, he said.

Water company officials and community activists say Fontana residents are being unfairly burdened because the city is not included in a cleanup plan being developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Last year, the EPA added a nearby 160-acre industrial area in Rialto, known as the Goodrich site, to its Superfund list for hazardous waste cleanup.

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Experts will use an isotope study on perchlorate molecules found in well water to find out if contamination is seeping from manmade sites, a U.S. Geological Survey official says.

The parcel is just east of Fontana, north of Highway 210, between Alder and Locust avenues. It was used by private companies and government agencies to store, test and manufacture munitions, rocket motors and pyrotechnics. Chemicals were dumped on the ground or burned in pits for decades and seeped into the water table, EPA

investigators said.

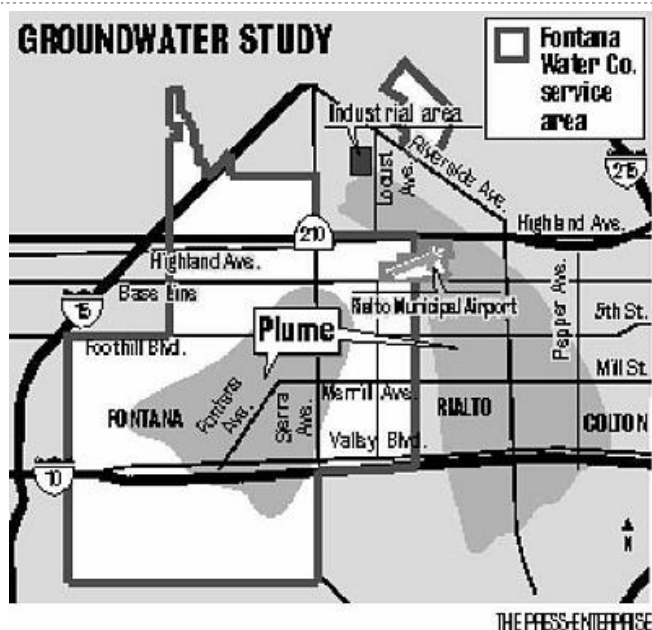
Perchlorate is a rocket fuel ingredient that can impair thyroid function. Some of the wells contaminated with perchlorate also have had elevated levels of the cleaning solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, a likely carcinogen that may cause liver and kidney damage and impair fetal development.

RIVERSIDE-BOUND

The plume extends seven miles to the southeast and appears to be headed toward three Riverside wells. Fontana Water Co., which serves 160,000 people, closed nine wells and spent millions of dollars on treatment systems, Ruiz said. Another 11 wells have been shut down in Rialto and Colton.

Experts will use an isotope study on perchlorate molecules found in the well water to determine whether the contamination is seeping from the manmade sources, such as the Goodrich site or adjacent Mid Valley Sanitary Landfill owned by San Bernardino County, or from Chilean fertilizer used in agricultural operations from the 1900s to the 1950s, said John Izbicki, a USGS research hydrologist.

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He also will examine groundwater movement in relation to earthquake faults. The Goodrich site and the landfill are sandwiched in a triangular area between the Rialto-Colton and San Jacinto faults.

The consensus is that the water moves to the south-southeast, toward the Santa Ana River and Riverside's wells. But there is some movement across the fault lines, Izbicki said.

"There are people who have differing opinions about how the water is moving," he said.

Fontana Water Co. officials say the EPA is relying on old data developed by probable responsible parties at the expense of ratepayers.

"There is some evidence that there is water moving from the northeast to the southwest across that series of faults," Ruiz said. "If that's the case, then we'll have a good sense that the people should also be responsible for what's going on on the southwest side" of the Superfund site.

EPA project manager Wayne Praskins denied allegations that the data is insufficient,

and said the government has spent several million dollars on its own well and soil testing. Those efforts, and the latest USGS studies, will complement each other, he said.

The EPA has proposed a \$29.3 million plan to install wells northeast of the Rialto airport that would pump and treat the water before it is delivered to homes and businesses. A decision is on how the agency will proceed is expected by next month.

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