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Agencies move to protect water

Districts want drinking supply to be free of Aerojet chemicals.

By Bill Lindelof -- Bee Staff Writer

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Two water districts, rocket-engine maker Aerojet and government regulators are moving forward with efforts to protect groundwater supplies in Carmichael and Fair Oaks.

Both Fair Oaks and Carmichael water districts are taking steps to stop plumes of chemicals from reaching groundwater wells they use for residential water.

District managers from both districts told about 60 citizens at a town-hall-style meeting last week that their drinking supplies are clean and safe to drink.

The public meeting also included presentations from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Aerojet.

Some citizens told the panel that they are worried about the spreading plume of groundwater pollutants in Carmichael.

"I am really concerned about the efforts to get ahead of the plume," said Seth Hodges, a Carmichael resident. "I'm also concerned about whether there are enough monitoring wells."

Aerojet's plume of tainted groundwater already has rendered many wells undrinkable in Rancho Cordova south of the American River near the company's property.

In 2003, in groundwater test wells drilled at Rossmoor Bar - close to the Carmichael Water District jurisdiction - Aerojet found the contaminant NDMA (N-nitrosodimethylamine), which was used in making liquid rocket fuel.

In Fair Oaks in the mid-1990s, Aerojet also discovered that the solvent TCE (trichloroethylene), had crossed below the American River at Sailor Bar.

The company ran a pipe under the river to treat the contaminated Fair Oaks water in Rancho Cordova. Now, steps are being taken to further protect Fair Oaks water and also keep Carmichael water clean.

In Carmichael, the company expects a system of extraction wells and treatment facilities will be working by 2006.

In Fair Oaks, Aerojet expects similar new wells to be installed and treatment systems in place by 2007.

"With both systems we will have sufficient time to put in a remedy before both drinking supplies are threatened," said Tim Murphy, director of public affairs for GenCorp Inc., parent company of Aerojet.

Both districts use groundwater and American River surface water.

"Aerojet is appreciative of the cooperative relationship we have with both water districts," Murphy said. "It is allowing us to quickly move forward with our cleanup activities."

Steve Nugent, general manager of the Carmichael Water District, said, "If we don't get to the point where we get these plumes contained ... (they) will continue to migrate."

If not contained, the plume will migrate from 300 feet to 800 feet annually, he said.

The Carmichael well site closest to the plume is 6,000 feet away.

Nugent described three scenarios in which the groundwater would be cleaned, in each case using three wells to pump the water into pipelines that would take the water to a treatment plant where the pollutant would be removed.

One option would involve constructing a small treatment plant at the Ancil Hoffman Golf Course. A second alternative would to build a similar small treatment plant on district property on Bajamont Way. The third plan calls for using treatment plants at both the golf course and the Bajamont Way site.

After being treated, the water would be discharged into the American River or used to irrigate Ancil Hoffman Golf Course. The district favors using the treated water on the golf course, because if it was released into the river, the district would get no use of the valuable resource.

Alex MacDonald, an engineer with the state's Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, said Aerojet would pay for the treatment plants, pipes and wells.

"The goal of the system is to stop the plume," MacDonald said.

When TCE was detected a decade ago in Fair Oaks, a series of extraction wells were installed on both the north side of the American River - in Sailor Bar Park - and on the south side near the Nimbus Fish Hatchery, MacDonald said.

The wells were put in place with the best information available at the time, he said.

"The system is doing really well but probably there is some (pollutant) that has leaked past," MacDonald said. "This next effort is to go out there and capture that little bit that has escaped."

Two new extraction wells will be installed in Fair Oaks. One proposal calls for tying them into a pipeline that would take the water back under the river to Aerojet for cleaning in an arrangement similar to what happens now.

However, District General Manager Tom Gray will ask water customers at board meetings and through fliers if it is better to remove the TCE from the water at a treatment plant in Fair Oaks and use the cleaned water in Fair Oaks taps.

"That decreases the cost of purchasing water to our customers," he said.

If customers don't want the water used in their homes, perhaps it could be used in parks, cemeteries or streams, Gray said.

A third option could be to release treated water into the river and have Carmichael Water District pump it out downstream and deliver it back to Fair Oaks.

"Essentially, the solution to pollution is dilution," Gray said.

A fourth alternative would involve replacement of the contaminated water being taken across the river for treatment.

"If the regulators decide it is the most prudent to take our water and pump it across the river to be treated and then give it to somebody else, then I am going to seek gallon-for-gallon replacement from Aerojet," Gray said.

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