

Lowell Sun

Westford hires firm to investigate water contamination

By Meaghan Wims
Sun Staff

Tuesday, December 21, 2004 - WESTFORD The town has signed a contract with an environmental firm that will investigate the source of perchlorate contamination in town and determine whether additional homes are at risk.

Comprehensive Environmental Inc., of Milford, Mass., and Merrimack, N.H., will do the work, funded by a \$55,000 appropriation by voters at the October Town Meeting.

Perchlorate is a chemical used in blasting materials that can cause health problems in sensitive populations, such as those with thyroid conditions or pregnant women, and it is a suspected carcinogen.

Tests in August found unhealthy levels of perchlorate 545 parts per billion (ppb) compared to the state's acceptable 1 ppb in the well owned by Kenneth Winchester at 1 Emily Way. Perchlorate was also found in the Cote well near North Street, one of the town's eight wells.

Winchester's house is located near two sites with tainted groundwater: The town's new highway garage off North Street and a quarry owned by the Tresca Corporation, where blasting had been done until it was suspended more than a year ago. Those sites are suspected as the cause of the contamination, but no source has been officially named.

Samples of other private wells have been clean, but perchlorate can "travel rapidly and readily in groundwater," CEI's President Eileen Pannetier wrote in a letter to Town Manager Steven Ledoux.

Private wells and swimming pools are susceptible to the perchlorate plume, Pannetier wrote.

"While there is no guarantee that the perchlorate will move in a predictable way due [to] the nature of groundwater flow in fractured areas, any prevention of contamination that can be done will be highly cost-effective in the long term," she wrote.

The firm will provide a map of the areas most at risk and its recommendations for future sampling and preventative actions.

Standing ponds will be tested for perchlorate and runoff. The firm will also look into the stormwater runoff into the Cote well and how the well could be treated and protected. All this work will be used to detail potential sources of the contamination.

The state Department of Environmental Protection is continuing to investigate the issue. DEP is planning another sampling of residential wells and surface water this week or next to determine if the plume is moving, spokesman Ed Coletta said yesterday.

"We're still moving forward with the investigation and hope to have a better idea of the plume itself after the round of sampling is done," he said.

Meanwhile, Town Manager Steven Ledoux said the town is close to signing an agreement with Kenneth Winchester.

Town voters approved \$31,000 to tie Winchester's home into the town's water supply. But before that, the town seeks an agreement with Winchester that would prevent him from holding the town responsible for the contamination or any health problems his family may suffer.

Winchester said he does not want to sign such an agreement.

"We've been through this for six months," he said. "They know who the source is. It's pretty black and white."

For the last six months, his family has used bottled water for cooking and drinking. The tap water is brown and their clothes smell. "It's a nightmare," Winchester said.

"The line should have been put in two months ago. We just want our water," he said. "It's just real simple: Put the water line in and everyone's happy."

A new report by Clean Water Action found trace amounts of perchlorate in eight other Massachusetts communities, including Tewksbury. The chemical is on the federal Environmental Protection Agency list of "monitored" substances being watched for potential health risks.

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