

Cote Well may come back online

By Ariel Z. Burch/ Staff Reporter
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Water from the Cote Well may be available for public use this fall, according to Elaine Major, environmental compliance manager for the Westford Water Department. The Water Department, in a unanimous vote Sept. 7, supported a treatment plan proposed by Comprehensive Environmental, Inc. that complies with standards set by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

The Cote Well was taken offline July 2004 after water supply sampling required by the DEP at the Nutting Road Water Treatment Plant detected perchlorate at a level of 2.4 parts per billion.

Perchlorate is an oxidizer used in blasting materials. The DEP advises pregnant women, infants and children up to the age of 12, and people with hypothyroidism against consuming water that has tested over 1 part perchlorate per billion. The water is safe to drink up to 18 parts per billion for the general population.

The proposed treatment plan is similar to the DEP approved treatment currently used successfully in Millbury, and will consist of two vessels with resin, an ion exchange media. The resin is designed to remove perchlorate from the water supply.

When the system is installed, possibly as early as this month, the water will be potable after just one day, according to Major. Water will be pumped to waste for the first 24 hours and then will move through the two vessels, and to the treatment plant, at which point perchlorate will have been reduced to a safe level, she said.

"I don't think we've ever had a discussion where any of the Commissioners ever thought we shouldn't do this," said Board of Water Commissioners Secretary Doug Deschenes. Decisions about treatment of the Cote Well had been delayed until last week while a treatment plan was formulated that would work for the town and receive approval from the DEP.

Perchlorate contamination is more pervasive than people had thought, said Richard Cote of Comprehensive Environmental. (Richard Cote is not related to the well owners.) "We've essentially had surface water from the (Cote) well flow into our aquifer. That's what started all of this," said Cote. This surface water runoff migrates through cracks in the bedrock into the aquifer and then is drawn back into the Cote well.

"I can't help but think that if we did this treatment in Cote it might mitigate the problem," said Water Department Superintendent Warren E. Sweetser. Treatment of the Cote well could inadvertently clean a large area of the aquifer, because it will dilute the amount of perchlorate, allowing the chemical to break down naturally in the environment. "This stuff isn't like gasoline or other contaminants that stick in the soil. It has little affinity for soil. It will flush out," said Cote.

Disagreement had been expressed in the past about the parties responsible for contamination of the water supply, but the question of who should pay was not addressed at the most recent meeting. Major said that the Water Department will pay, unless the DEP should issue a notice of responsibility. "It is important enough that the Water Department will pay," said Major.

Selectman James Silva asked at the Sept. 7 meeting if treatment of the Cote well is necessary. Sweetser said that, with only eight available wells in the entire system, and one well already disabled by perchlorate contamination, the possibility of a serious water shortage is very high if something should happen to another well. The problem would be especially great in the summer when water demand is highest. "You can never have too much water. Actually the rule of thumb basically is that you never walk away from a well," said Sweetser. It is much more efficient to clean a contaminated well than to create a new well altogether, and it seems that

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the Water Department now has a very viable plan for treatment of the Cote Well.

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