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Filter system now online at Cote Well

By **Ariel Z. Burch**/ Staff Writer
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A new filter system at the Cote Well is sticking it to perchlorate - literally.

Filtration was functioning yesterday and is cleaning perchlorate from the water using a new resin treatment system, according to Westford Water Superintendent Warren Sweetser.

"Based on the town's needs for a reliable and safe water supply and the fact that perchlorate contamination could take years for the natural dilution effect to flush it out, the Westford Water Department moved forward to design, permit and install a treatment system at the Cote Well. The system consists of two high-flow pressure vessels using a perchlorate-selective resin," according to the Water Department.

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) approved operation of the filter system, which was designed with engineers from Comprehensive Environmental, Inc. of Milford. The system includes two filtration tanks that each process about 200 to 300 gallons of water per minute. The water will flow from the first filter, stocked with perchlorate-removing resin, to the second filter, which will act as back-up. Perchlorate will stick to the ion-exchange resin, and be removed from the water. This system is similar to the DEP approved treatment currently used successfully in Millbury, also designed with Comprehensive Environmental.

The system was accepted by the Board of Selectmen last Tuesday after discussion that focussed on the excessively high cost estimates of past perchlorate removal plans.

Selectman Valerie Wormell said the Selectmen were told 2 1/2 years ago that decontamination would cost \$1.5 million.

"I've got to tell you, Warren, this is one of the reasons I ran for office, because my eyes popped open," Wormell said.

The total cost estimate for the new system is \$100,000, Sweetser said, \$46,000 for the two filtration vessels, \$16,000 for engineering and \$32,800 for initial resin. Resin will have to be replaced every eight months to one year at a cost of about \$16,000. Sweetser said the town saved money by using Water Department employees to install the filters.

Selectmen said this will be much more cost effective than past plans because the filtration vessels can remain in the ground at no cost after perchlorate removal is complete.

"Once it is clean, you will just have to stop buying the resin," said Richard Cote of Comprehensive Environmental (Richard Cote is not related to the well owners). He said the vessels are inexpensive and will be rented for six months with an option to buy and the more expensive resin will be purchased on an as-needed basis.

"The entire [design and installation] process was completed in less than nine months, a process that typically takes about two years, and will allow Westford to use the Cote Well as water demands increase in the coming summer months," according to the Water Department. Sweetser said water use increases dramatically in summer months.

"In the winter time, with the same number of residents, we typically pump one million dollars a day and in the summer, depending on the day, it could be \$3.1 or \$3.2 million, so the usage definitely goes up in the summer," Sweetser said.

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, and the well remained dormant until preliminary testing two weeks ago.







Sweetser said these recent tests showed no perchlorate, but said he is confident, based on multiple tests in nearby observation wells, that perchlorate is flowing into the Cote Well.

"We have the filter system in place and we are not going to take a chance," Sweetser said.

However, officials do not know the exact origin of the perchlorate.

"It came from somewhere on the hill [the Snake Meadow Hill area], whether it's the quarry or the

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Highway Garage, no one really knows ... I don't know if they will ever know where the problem came from," Sweetser said. Water Department officials have guessed that blasting at the Highway Garage off North Street or at the quarry owned by the Tresca Corporation could have caused perchlorate to leak into the Cote Well.

The time needed to clean the well is another unknown variable. Sweetser said preliminary testing was done yesterday but results will not be available for about one week.

Perchlorate is an oxidizer that can be found in blasting agents, fireworks, munitions and other manufacturing processes. Unlike gasoline and other contaminants, perchlorate is not biodegradable.

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 2 parts perchlorate per billion. Water is safe to drink up to 18 parts per billion for the general population.

The new system will clean perchlorate from the water until the level drops below the DEP regulated two parts per billion.



"The DEP, after an extended length of time, came up with their standard of two parts per billion," Cote said. When the Cote Well was taken offline in 2004, the DEP recommended a limit of one part per billion.

A perchlorate level of one part per billion is equal to one drop of ink in a large tanker truck, or one drop of ink in a home swimming pool, according to the Water Department.

"It's there and they find it in lettuce. So, it hangs around for a long time," said Cote.

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