

GILROY DISPATCH

Perchlorate plea to the governor

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By Matt King

Gilroy - A collection of environmental groups petitioned state agencies Tuesday to reopen discussion of the state's public health goal for perchlorate and - in the meantime - set an emergency drinking water standard of 1 part per billion.

The petition was inspired by a report released earlier this month by the National Academy of Sciences. Environmental advocates have interpreted that report as strong evidence that California's current health goal of 6 parts per billion is too high.

The NAS report does not include a drinking water standard. It uses a body-weight formulation that equates to 14 parts per billion for the average adult, but needs to be revised downward for children.

Calculations by various environmental groups have placed the standard for small children anywhere from one to 4 parts per billion. Last week, John Laird (D-Santa Cruz) said he believed the health goal should be set at four.

But Sujatha Jahagirdar, of Environment California, one of the signatories to the petition, said that the petition is not a negotiating tool.

"This is not a flea market, this is kids' health. We're not going to barter," Jahagirdar said. "We legitimately believe that one is the standard the state can reasonably set to protect small children. This is not a political strategy."

Perchlorate is a salt used in rocket fuel, jet engines and road flares. It has been shown to alter thyroid function in lab animals, and was first discovered in Morgan Hill in 2003, at the site of a former road flare plant owned by Olin Corp. South County's groundwater is contaminated in a plume that flows about 10.5 miles to the south, stretching through San Martin and into northern Gilroy.

In addition to Environment California, the petition was signed by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Working Group, Clean Water Action, Sierra Club-California, Center for Community Action & Environmental Justice, Citizens for Chuckwalla Valley, INSIST and San Martin resident Sylvia Martin, who is head of the Perchlorate Community Advisory Group.

"Right now scientists are all over the place as far as their recommendations, and I think if we're going to err, we need to err on the

side of caution," Hamilton said.

Just last week, many of the signatories were debating whether the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment should reopen the public health goal. If it does, the goal could potentially go up, and the process is likely to take at least two years.

Andria Ventura, of Clean Water Action, said that those risks are outweighed by a combination of circumstances. In addition to the NAS report, a study released late last year by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found perchlorate in lettuce and milk in each of the 15 states where testing was done. Also, a law signed last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger requires the state to review the effects of perchlorate on pregnant women and children.

"Clean Water Action has always held that the public health goal should be one," Ventura said, "and if you put those three things together, the time is now to make a change."

Allen Hirsch, spokesman for OEHHA, said Tuesday that the petition "will be part of the mix," as his agency determines whether to take a second look at the health

goal, which it issued in 2004.

Hirsch said the petition was the first relating to public health goals, which cover an array of contaminants, including arsenic and methyl tertiary butyl ether, or MTBE.

"This issue has gotten a lot more attention than most of our public health goals," Hirsch said. "There is a tremendous amount of public interest in perchlorate."

A drinking water standard will be set by the state's Department of Health Services, a separate agency, but the standard can not be lower than the public health goal. A drinking water standard tied to the current goal was expected to be released this year. The DHS could not be reached for comment.

U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer also called for an emergency drinking water standard Tuesday. In a letter to the governor, she said "a review of (available) data will clearly show that that California's recommended public health goal of 6 parts per billion is not protective of the most vulnerable populations and that the permanent standard needs to be lowered."

The DHS has issued an emergency drinking water standard once before, in response to high levels of dibromochloropropane in and around Fresno. Under state law, an emergency standard initiates a period for health officials to analyze new data on perchlorate. If no action is

taken after 240 days, the standard becomes permanent.



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