

Water company vows not to use tainted well

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The Arizona American Water Co. will no longer use a contaminated well as a source of drinking water for its customers in Paradise Valley and Scottsdale.

Arizona American contracts with Motorola to remove the industrial solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, a suspected cancer-causing agent, that Motorola and other companies dumped decades ago into the northeast Valley groundwater.

In October and January, water contaminated with TCE got into the water supply for nearly 5,000 customers of Arizona American in Paradise Valley and Scottsdale.

The most recent incident resulted last month in a three-day ban on drinking tap water or using it for cooking and prompted Scottsdale officials to consider alternate water supplies for the nearly 1,200 Scottsdale customers of Arizona American.

Even if the well is not used for domestic purposes, it still must be pumped and the water treated to prevent a plume containing TCE from expanding northward in the North Indian Bend Wash aquifer.

Paul Townsley, president of Arizona American, made the announcement last week during a 5 1/2-hour fact-finding meeting held Wednesday by the Arizona Corporation Commission, the state agency that regulates private water companies.

The commission sets water rates and attempts to ensure customer service.

Townsley said the well, known as PCX-1, will no longer be used as a source of drinking water.

The well is owned by Salt River Project, but is treated by Arizona American.

The well pumps about 3 million gallons of water a day. Arizona American's Paradise Valley and Scottsdale customers use from 5 million to 15 million gallons a day, depending on the time of year and peak use.

Townsley also announced that:

- Arizona American intends to terminate its agreement with Motorola to treat PCX-1 well water for TCE.
- The PCX-1 well will be disconnected from its system so that it will be physically impossible for the well to contaminate Arizona American's water supply.

- Arizona American will continue to treat its own wells, which have very low levels of TCE present in them. There are two of them.
- Arizona American has told Motorola and the others responsible for the contamination that it believes it is their responsibility to fix the treatment facility and the plant-control system to prevent malfunctions from occurring again and to consider paying to have the plant staffed 24 hours per day.

The January incident was not detected immediately because the plant was unmanned at the time. A series of alarms designed to alert operators remotely failed to do so. Arizona American already had plans to install a new computer system.

- Arizona American also will continue to augment and evaluate its sources of telephone numbers for its reverse-911 database and will work even more closely with public-health regulators to ensure that the level and type of public outreach it undertakes is consistent with their expectations given the particular situation at hand.

Arizona American operates a treatment facility at Miller Road and McDonald Drive in Scottsdale that removes the TCE from water through a process known as air stripping. There are three air-stripping towers at the plant.

The plant remains closed following an incident in January in which a blower on the tower that was in operation at the time failed, causing water contaminated with TCE up to four times the federal maximum level allowed into the drinking supply.