

News

SOUTH S.J. WELLS TAPPING INTO A FEW HOT SPOTS MAJORITY MEET HEALTH STANDARDS, ANALYSIS FINDS

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Most of the wells tapping into a vast underground sea in the north San Joaquin Valley provide water that meets human health standards for heavy metals or chemicals, according to a new federal analysis.

But the region still has hot spots where groundwater quality is a concern.

Arsenic, in particular, is prevalent in south San Joaquin County. The naturally-occurring metal was found at "high" levels - greater than health-based benchmarks - across 9 percent of the study area, which includes San Joaquin County and portions of Alameda, Amador, Calaveras, Contra Costa and Stanislaus counties.

Most of that 9 percent falls within an area stretching from south Stockton to Manteca.

The analysis by the U.S. Geological Survey considers the quality of raw groundwater only; it does not take into account methods that cities use to clean the water and make it safe.

In Manteca, for example, city officials have upgraded six wells and are in the process of upgrading six more to treat the water and meet new federal standards for arsenic. Somewhere in the neighborhood of \$12 million will have been spent by the time the work is finished, said Keith Conarroe, a senior engineer for Manteca.

"There's a lot of other communities that simply don't have the funding or the resources that Manteca had, and are struggling to find ways to pay for this," Conarroe said.

Arsenic is somewhat less pervasive in Stockton, although three of the city's roughly two dozen wells are not being used in part because of arsenic concerns.

The city received plenty of water from rivers and streams this year, meaning it didn't have to rely on groundwater as much as it has in the past. It can blend that river water with the groundwater to meet standards.

"We're taking more surface water now than we ever had, which is a good thing," said Bob Granberg, deputy director of Stockton's Municipal Utilities Department.

Arsenic is not the only contaminant covered in the USGS study.

Nutrients - such as fertilizer applied to crops - seep into the groundwater as well, but only 2 percent of the region's groundwater registered as "high."

Perchlorate, an ingredient in rocket fuel, and pesticides were also most often detected in low concentrations.

Similar studies are being conducted across California, said USGS hydrologist George Bennett. The data isn't intended for the public to gauge any risk, but may assist local officials whose duty it is to manage underground aquifers, Bennett said.

It is, Bennett said, "one of the better, more recent measurements of groundwater quality throughout the state."

Overall, of the 290 potential contaminants for which experts tested, they detected 84 in the north Valley. They concluded that naturally-occurring elements are affecting groundwater quality more than man-made chemicals.

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