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Wells in Chicago seeing TCE contamination

CHICAGO — Numerous private water wells in the area are testing positive for trichloroethylene (TCE), a toxic chemical that is a common groundwater contaminant nationwide.

TCE became a public health and political issue here after hundreds of homeowners in unincorporated DuPage County discovered that their wells were tainted, the *Chicago Tribune* reported.

As a result, residents are facing costly decisions about getting alternative sources of drinking water. They also are asking questions about how TCE is getting into the water and why they weren't made aware of it years ago, the newspaper said.

Gov. George Ryan last month initiated a task force to determine if more services or legislation are needed to help private well owners have a safe supply of drinking water. Its first task is dealing with TCE contamination, said the article.

TCE is a metal degreaser and chemical used in paint thinners, spot removers, adhesives and other products.

Bill Ryan, geologist for the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) water division in Chicago, said TCE is a persistent problem because the degreaser is used so widely in a variety of industrial and consumer applications, according to the *Tribune*. TCE was often discarded carelessly or spilled accidentally, seeping into groundwater. As a result, it became one of the most common groundwater contaminants, ranking among the top 20 national hazardous substances listed by the EPA.

Around the country, TCE has been found in 60 percent of the 1,430 federal Superfund Cleanup sites, including nine in Illinois, the article said.

The newspaper said people with wells at or above TCE standards have been strongly advised by the Illinois Department of Public Health to find another supply of drinking water, an expensive solution requiring thousands of dollars to hook up to a municipal water system or install a special filter.

Alan Wehrmann, a groundwater hydrologist with the Illinois State Water Survey, a state-run data collector in Champaign, IL, said TCE is what environmental engineers call a "sinker," a chemical compound heavier than water. Combine that with porous soil, shallow aquifers and the poor habits of manufacturers and it is not surprising that the solvent is in the groundwater.

In the last 10 years, there has been an increase in care, technology and regulation for the industry to control contamination, he said, but TCE continues to find its way into private wells. Typically, private wells are not tested for TCE when homes are bought or constructed, and no federal or state regulation dictates otherwise, the article stated.

For four years, the Atlanta-based federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has kept a log of people exposed to TCE to track its long-term health effects. Agency officials said the impact of the solvent on human health is not yet clear, but depending on the amount consumed or inhaled, TCE can cause nausea, liver or kidney damage, impaired heart or immune system function, unconsciousness or death, the *Tribune* reported.

Last October, the EPA said it may reclassify TCE as a likely cause of cancer, not just a suspected carcinogen