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Health officials ask some Lebanon residents to test well water

Oregon state health officials are recommending that well owners in downtown Lebanon, Ore., test their well-water for the presence of two industrial solvents that have been found in the groundwater that feeds the wells. The solvents, tetrachloroethylene (PCE) and trichloroethylene (TCE) are both linked to cancer when consumed at high levels.

The recommendation is included in a report issued Jan. 22, 2009 by the Oregon Department of Human Services Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP), a part of the Oregon Public Health Division.

State health officials are concerned that some well-owners in the area have not had their wells tested, and may be exposed to unsafe levels of these chemicals in their home water supply. EHAP is sending information to 300 residents in the contamination area with facts about the contaminants and how they can get their well-water tested. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is providing free water tests for residents living in this area, which includes parts of downtown Lebanon. Testing can be scheduled by calling (541) 687-7349.

In the report, EHAP examined the health risks from using water with the highest levels of PCE (55 parts per billion) and TCE (14 parts per billion) detected in some of the domestic wells. The main ways that residents could be exposed to PCE and TCE are by using contaminated water for drinking and cooking, and breathing in small amounts of chemicals that evaporate from the water when bathing, washing dishes or doing laundry. EHAP found the potential for elevated cancer risks if water with these high levels of PCE and TCE was used for all of these purposes.

The highest PCE and TCE levels that were detected are above the state and federal safe drinking water level, or Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL), which is 5 parts per billion for PCE and TCE. The DEQ is offering alternate water supplies to residents who have well contamination above the MCLs and do not currently have city water. DEQ is currently providing bottled water to five residences.

Because residents whose wells contain high levels of PCE and TCE are using bottled water supplied by DEQ for drinking and cooking, EHAP concluded that the chemicals currently pose no apparent public health hazard. However, some residents may have consumed water with these high levels in the past, resulting in the potential for elevated cancer risks.

The contamination was first detected in 1990 and has been investigated several times by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the DEQ. DEQ is overseeing cleanup efforts to reduce the PCE and TCE levels in Lebanon's groundwater. DEQ plans to conduct more studies in 2009, including additional well sampling and a study to determine if vapors are migrating from the groundwater and affecting indoor air quality.

Lebanon residents who have who have questions about well-testing can call Don Hanson at DEQ at (541) 687-7349. Residents with health-related questions can call Sujata Joshi at (971) 673-1213.

The full report and fact sheet can be found on the web at www.healthoregon.org/ehap.