

Local water suppliers work to meet new chromium-6 standards

LINDZI WESSEL 9:58 p.m. PST January 28, 2016



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Central Coast water suppliers are continuing efforts to comply with California's newest limits on the potentially cancer-causing compound chromium-6.

Although the EPA has concluded that chromium-6 is a carcinogen when inhaled as a gas, the agency has yet to issue a conclusion on whether the element increases cancer risk when ingested orally.

Health concerns over chromium-6 ballooned with the 2000 movie, "Erin Brockovich," which detailed the true story of residents in Hinkley, California, who sued PG&E after the company's activities caused the element to seep into local water sources.

"We've been working round the clock to figure out how to reduce chromium in the water," said Robert Thompson, water quality program manager at California Water Services, which just celebrated its newest chromium plant in Las Lomas. So far, Cal Water has installed nine operational chromium treatment plants in California, a process that typically costs \$750,000 to \$1.3 million, he says.

The scramble is not due to an increase in chromium-6, which, because of the sediments and rocks present in the area, occurs naturally in some Central Coast water sources, but rather to the more stringent state requirements that went into effect in 2014.

Though federal requirements remain at 100 parts per billion, as the EPA's continues to evaluate the elements health impacts, the state moved its limit from 50 ppb to 10 ppb. The average concentration of chromium in Watsonville municipal water is 13 ppb, meaning that city is also hard at work to meet new standards for the 50,000 residents receiving municipal water.

"We've been working really closely with the [California] Division of Drinking Water to develop our chromium-6 compliance plan," said Michelle Templeton, environmental projects manager for the City of Watsonville. The city has contracted with the company, Corona Environmental Consulting, and is conducting pilot tests to determine a treatment plan that's tailored for Watsonville, she said.

"There's been research in chromium-6 treatment for about 15 years and there are about three technologies that have proven to be effective," said Beau Kayser, water operations manager for the city of Watsonville. "Unfortunately, there's not a one-size-fits-all kind of treatment."

That's why the city brought in Corona Environmental, Templeton said.

"They have the background on all the different types of treatment options and ways of piloting that – so that we can develop a treatment system that is tailored specifically for Watsonville to be the most effective at treatment and the most efficient cost-wise."

Expense is a major challenge looming in the future of Watsonville's chromium-6 compliance plan, as the initial treatment for the city's municipal water is projected to cost around \$20 million. Last year, the city secured \$3.2 million in grants to address water needs and is seeking additional grants and loans to cover the cost of this project.

In combination with new pipes and other infrastructure improvements, chromium-6 requirements caused a bump in water rates this summer. Templeton could not say the exact increase, but says it was marginal compared to nearby municipalities.

Although it's too early in the process to say precisely when the process will be complete, Templeton said treatment plants will be up and running within the five years allotted to them by the state.

"Our compliance plan is well under way here," she said.

Though, for now, chromium-6 levels will remain slightly above the state's new limit in Watsonville, Templeton wants residents to know that the drinking water has not declined in safety or quality.

"Watsonville wells are slightly higher than the new [maximum contaminant level], but they are much lower than the old MCL.

Just like us

"This isn't a situation where there's outcroppings of illness, this is a situation where the state took initiative to change something," she said. "I think people should rest assured that their drinking water is safe and that there haven't been health issues in our community."