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Councilman urges bill to study perchlorate

WATER BASIN: A Rialto official tells a House subcommittee it should get involved to stop the spread of contamination.

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Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - Congressional action is needed to initiate a federal study of water contamination in the Rialto-Colton water basin, a Rialto official told lawmakers Tuesday on Capitol Hill.

Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Water and Power, Councilman Ed Scott spoke in support of a bill requiring the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct the $2.4 million study, which is stalled by funding problems.

"The dilemma we face today is the plume of contamination continues to move southeasterly at a high rate of speed -- possibly two feet per day towards the county of Riverside and, eventually, Orange County," Scott said. "This frightening possibility could affect the water source for hundreds of thousands of people."

Inland Rep. Joe Baca in May introduced the legislation to mandate the study, which would focus on ending the decades-old presence of perchlorate in the region's water supply. Perchlorate is a rocket fuel additive linked to thyroid problems, particularly among pregnant women and small children.

"The citizens in this area deserve to have a reliable source of drinking water," said Baca, D-Rialto, who sits on the subcommittee.

The Department of Defense's storage and destruction of explosives in the area dating to the 1940s has been blamed, along with the toll of defense contractors and fireworks firms operating in the area in subsequent decades.

Today the plume is estimated to be six miles long and a mile wide, and it has forced Rialto officials to shut down seven of its 13 wells for some period, said Scott, a member of the region's perchlorate task force. That has reduced the city's water-production capacity by almost half.

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Roseville, questioned the need for a bill requiring the study, since the U.S. Geological Survey already has the authority to conduct one.

"Why should Congress substitute its judgment in place of the agency involved?" McClintock asked.

Matthew Larsen, the survey's associate director for water, confirmed that the agency has the authority and scientific wherewithal to complete the study, and he suggested any decontamination plan could serve as a model for other areas struggling with the same issue.

"Perchlorate is an issue throughout the southwestern U.S.," Larsen wrote in prepared testimony submitted to the panel. "Therefore, methods developed to understand the perchlorate contamination in the Rialto-Colton area could be useful to water managers in other basins."

But the program that would fund the study has an annual budget of only $63 million, and the Rialto project must compete for federal dollars with similar projects all over the country.

In California, that problem has been further complicated by a requirement that state governments must come up with 70 percent of the funding, a provision that puts the cash-strapped state at a decided disadvantage, Larsen said.

Under Baca's bill, however, the full amount of the project cost would be paid out of the federal program's budget, Baca spokesman John Lowrey said. The bill must pass a vote in the subcommittee and the full Natural Resources Committee before it would go to the House floor for a vote.

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