

TOXIC PLUME MENACES TAP WATER

A toxic plume from Weyerhaeuser menaces local drinking water sources, and the pollution is worse than expected. But don't panic: The low chemical concentration is still considered safe, according to EWEB.

"We believe the plume poses a low risk," EWEB staff wrote to the public utility's board of commissioners Nov. 12.

That's partly because the Springfield utility (SUB/RWD) is sucking up the pollution in its drinking water wells before it reaches Eugene's source of water, the McKenzie, according to the EWEB memo. "The SUB/RWD well field acts as a groundwater capture zone effectively drawing PCP contamination toward the pumping wells before contaminants can enter the river."

Last May SUB/RWD started up carbon filters to remove the pollution for its customers.

From the early 1960s until 1987, Weyerhaeuser spilled a wood preservative, pentachlorophenol (PCP), on the ground at its Springfield mill about a mile up the McKenzie from EWEB's drinking water intake and Springfield's drinking water wells. Weyerhaeuser sold its Springfield plant to International Paper last year.

PCP is an industrial chemical that can cause liver, immune system, reproductive and developmental damage and is a probable carcinogen, according to federal research. EPA has a safety goal (MCLG) of zero PCP in drinking water but has set an enforceable limit (MCL) of one part per billion (1 ppb). That's about one drop in 500 barrels of water.

State regulators (DEQ) have known about the underground PCP plume since 1991. Weyerhaeuser did a partial cleanup and installed a monitoring system to determine when the toxic plume would reach Springfield's wells and the McKenzie. It's unclear why DEQ didn't require a full or more complete cleanup.

The pollution has moved faster than DEQ predicted. "Actual concentrations are higher than what was modeled," according to an EWEB staff memo to the public utility's board of commissioners. "Obviously, the modeling needs to be updated."

Last May the Springfield utility (SUB) detected low levels of PCP in its drinking water at 0.21 ppb, which is below the enforceable limit. SUB began filtering its well water to remove PCP pollution.

EWEB has not detected PCP at its downstream water intake but has found low levels of PCP in a slough (.47 ppb) and stormwater channel (.2 ppb) near the river. EWEB did find an extremely minute level (65 parts per quadrillion) of a PCP degradation product at its intake, but the utility is unsure if it came from Weyerhaeuser.

EWEB staff "does not believe it [PCP] poses a threat to EWEB's drinking water quality," the staff memo states. Weyerhaeuser's toxic plume will mix with large volumes of river water, bringing it well below unsafe levels, according to the memo. If monitoring shows concentrations are again higher than expected, EWEB could always start using filters like Springfield to remove the Weyerhaeuser toxin.

— Alan Pittman

SWINE FLU OR KITTY FLU?

Is Oregon the ground zero of swine flu for pets? This month the Beaver State laid claim to the first cat to die of H1N1: Buddy Lou, a tabby cat from Lebanon. Oregon was also the state to have the first confirmed case of a ferret with H1N1, as well as the first to have a ferret die of the illness. So far no dogs have contracted swine flu, but veterinarians say that doesn't mean that they can't get it.

Pigs can get and transmit the disease. Though the Oregon Animal Health and Identification Division hasn't reported any pig outbreaks in this state, pigs are where swine flu got its name, and herds of pigs in Iowa and elsewhere have tested positive for the virus.

A flock of domestic turkeys in Ontario, Canada, came down with the illness earlier this year, but even if that turkey you're cooking up for Thanksgiving dinner was sneezing before it made its way to your plate, don't worry, "Proper cooking practices destroy the influenza virus," according to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Internal Affairs. So your vegetarian friends have got just as much chance as of getting swine flu over the holidays as your meat-eating pals. If you're going to catch the illness, it will be from your friends and family, not from the turkey you cooked.

In case you were wondering, it isn't unusual for diseases to be passed from animals to humans. Such illnesses, known as zoonoses, include anthrax, rabies, Hantavirus, typhus, Ebola and of course, everybody's favorite, the plague, as well as less frightening diseases like ringworm. It's less common for a human to pass a disease to an animal, but in the cases of Buddy Lou and the other domestic pets, that's what happened.

Don't panic: That pussycat you see wandering down your block isn't the next Typhoid Mary. Precautions for your pets are similar to what you would do to prevent human-to-human transmission of disease. According to Oregon State Public Health Veterinarian Dr. Emilio DeBess, you should wash your hands frequently, cover your cough and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth if you have had contact with a turkey, cat or anything else with a respiratory illness. Happy Turkey Day. — Camilla Mortensen

news Briefs

CITY BUDGET 'GLOOMY'

With police and fire unions balking at skipping a raise this year and the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) in the tank, the city of Eugene's bleak budget outlook is getting worse.

"It feels sort of gloomy, and it is really difficult," City Manager Jon Ruiz said at a city Budget Committee meeting Nov. 2.

Councilor Alan Zelenka described the budget forecast as "scary." If the city isn't able to close ongoing deficits, "we're going to be in a heap of trouble," he said.

Ruiz had proposed cutting \$12 million from this year's budget to make up a shortfall with "minimal impact" on employee layoffs and citizen services.

But the police union has so far refused to accept an elimination of its contracted cost of living (COLA) increase this year, even though there is no actual inflation in this recession. The firefighters' union may accept some COLA reduction, Ruiz said. The city's largest union, AFSCME, bargained for reduced work instead of the pay freeze, meaning closed offices and some reductions in service, according to Ruiz.

Of the \$12 million in cuts, Ruiz said that he's so far fallen about \$4 million short. But now he faces the more difficult challenge of repeating those cuts in ongoing years.

The city faces the added threat of a looming statewide PERS disaster. The retirement system lost more than a quarter of its value when the stock market crashed but still guarantees many of its beneficiaries an 8 percent return. Because of the way public employees and the city have negotiated the retirement system, taxpayers

will likely have to make up the billions of dollars in lost services and/or higher taxes.

Unless there is a dramatic stock turnaround, the PERS hit on the city could amount to about \$4 million or more per year in two years.

Council conservative Chris Pryor said he'd like to cut city services that he views as a lower priority. "This is going to be an incredibly difficult nut to crack," he said. "There may be entire areas that have to be turned off."

In the past such prioritizations have been criticized for cutting popular services while allowing waste in the large police and fire department budgets to go unscrutinized.

Ruiz said he may do it differently this time. "There may be a high priority service that can be provided differently."

One thing the city isn't doing differently is planning to spend \$16 million from its reserves to move the police out of downtown.

The spending on a controversial new police building amid budget cuts could complicate Ruiz's effort to pass a tax increase. Ruiz has created a "Meeting the Challenge Task Force" to look at options for a tax increase.

State Democrats are now pushing to pass an income tax increase on the wealthy and corporations. A local version of the progressive tax could pass in Eugene. But Ruiz, a Republican, has stacked his committee with people from the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce, which opposes the state tax increase for schools. — Alan Pittman

CIVIL RIGHTS HERO TINKER TO SPEAK

Mary Beth Tinker made history as a teenager by standing up for freedom of expression for young people, and she continues her campaign today. She is being brought to Eugene by the ACLU and will speak at a 6 to 8 pm benefit reception Thursday, Dec. 3, at Café Maroc, 30 E.

Happening people BY PAUL NEEVEL

JEREMY HALL

The son of a priest and a nun who left their vocations after they met in grad school, Jeremy Hall grew up on a nursery farm in Sonoma County, Calif.. His father later sold the business and worked as custodian at Oak Grove Elementary in Graton, where he enlisted the kids in recycling and cut the landfill haul by 90 percent. "When he retired, they commissioned a statue of him from recycled materials," reports Hall, who took a year off from studies at Willamette University to intern at Aprovecho, then returned and started a community garden. "We mixed kitchen scraps from Willamette with wood chips and saved 75 tons from the landfill." Made aware of forest issues by the 1996 flood in Salem, he "crossed the line" and got arrested at a logging protest, and afterwards worked seven years for the Oregon Natural Resources Council (now Oregon Wild) in Portland and Eugene. After a year away in Phoenix for his wife Erin Chaparro's Ph.D., he and business partner Bruce Kreitzberg opened Back to the Earth Landscaping, an all-organic company. He volunteers as board president of Cascadia Wildlands. "Our next big campaign will be wolves," he says. "We need a viable population here for a healthy relationship between predator and prey."

