

Agency will assess cleanup options for contaminated 'orphan' areas

DEQ looks again Casper sites

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Casper is home to two sites of chemical contamination that will be examined this fall after more than a decade without testing.

A state law passed in 2000 required the Department of Environmental Quality to inventory and provide cost assessments for cleanup of state "orphan sites." The sites are classified as locations where the agency can't identify the source of contamination or the party responsible for it.

Vicki Meredith, project manager in the solid and hazardous waste division of DEQ, said the state ran out of money in the early 1990s for testing, and no data has been collected since.

Meredith said DEQ officials are aware of two perchloroethylene plumes in north Casper and downtown that officials have merged into a single orphan site.

Perchloroethylene is a chemical common to cleaning solvents, often used by machine shops to clean tools and by dry cleaning services.

"One of the goals we have is to determine whether contamination still exists," Meredith said. "It's been a long time since anyone's looked at or analyzed groundwater in the area. Another goal is to try to figure out where the source of contamination is coming from. If we can figure out the source, we can keep it from acting as a continuing source."

Once DEQ knows the extent of contamination, if there is any, there are a couple of options for remediation. If there is a "responsible party," Meredith said, the department would seek reimbursement for cleaning costs. Otherwise, the state foots the bill.

Meredith said her agency isn't sure of the contamination source for the north Casper PCE plume, but testing will reveal if it's an active source. Last time the area was tested, contamination was more than 120 times higher than allowed.

"The maximum contaminant level in groundwater is 5 parts per billion," Meredith said. "In 1994, it was up to 630 [parts per billion]."

Meredith said residents shouldn't be concerned about the quality of drinking water because the contamination authorities last knew of is off of the water grid. Even if it were to reach the river, she said, the chemical would be so diluted that tests wouldn't be able to trace the chemical.

"We tested homes at that time, and we were assured nobody was drinking the water. With those two lines of evidence, we knew it was unlikely there was an imminent threat to anybody, but we knew there was a problem to be fixed," Meredith said.

Jolene Martinez, an administrative analyst with the city's public services division, said the location of Casper's water plant and river-water intake is upstream from the north Casper plume. Even the groundwater wells that the city draws from are far from the plume.

Testing the north Casper plume should cost around \$138,000, and it will be handled by Envirogroup.

There's also contamination downtown below 421 S. Center and 334 Wolcott, which stems from the old Lobell Refinery that operated between 1895 and 1911. That site has solvent contamination, like the north Casper plume, but also oil contamination.

"It's more than likely going to be an orphan site, and there's really no way for us to tell whether the owners since have contributed to the contamination or not," Meredith said.

TetraTech will do the testing on the Lobell Refinery site, which should cost about \$64,000.

Tax money collected on coal mined in Wyoming was allocated to the department for the studies, which should be under way in the coming months, she said.

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