

Aerojet gets OK to sell 2,600 acres

By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer

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A federal court order issued Monday allows Aerojet to sell 2,600 acres of Highway 50 frontage property in what would be the largest breakup of the rocket builder's vast and mostly idle holdings in Rancho Cordova.

U.S. District Judge Edward J. Garcia approved the deal over the objection of Rancho Cordova water agency officials who fear a water shortage.

The water officials say Aerojet should not be allowed to cash in on its land until the defense contractor guarantees it will replace well water contaminated by its underground plume of rocket-fuel chemicals.

The Sacramento County Water Agency and the Arden-Cordova Water Service together have taken 14 wells out of service because of Aerojet pollution.

The migrating plume threatens closure of another 13 wells in the area, including neighborhoods served by the California-American Water Co. (Cal-Am), formerly Citizens Utilities Co., federal environmental records say.

"We are barely able to meet our demands now," said William Hvidsten, attorney for the county water agency, which supplies the Sunrise-Douglas area, the Sunrise business corridor and housing at the former Mather Air Force Base.

Garcia said the utilities raise "serious points" but legally their arguments "are irrelevant and

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speculative -- anticipating problems that may occur in the future."

He said that two strong proponents of water development in the region -- Reps. John Doolittle and Robert Matsui -- were satisfied by Aerojet's assurances of alternative water supplies.

"Why do you think they approved?" he asked rhetorically.

Aerojet officials said that the changes Garcia approved Monday in the court-ordered cleanup provide the water-supply assurances sought by utilities.

"The (changes) will accelerate cleanup at the Superfund site and require Aerojet to provide replacement water for supplies it has damaged," said Robert Wolfe, chairman and chief executive officer of GenCorp., Aerojet's publicly traded parent company.

Aerojet officials agreed to these and other cleanup enforcement measures in exchange for state and federal enforcers allowing the company to remove a 2,600-acre chunk of land from the federal Superfund list of most polluted sites in the country.

The carve-out would accommodate Aerojet's plans to develop business parks and light industry along south Sunrise Boulevard and a prime stretch of Highway 50.

The land would have restrictions written into deeds that prohibit use of groundwater for drinking.

The property is rolling oak woodland that Aerojet said should never have been part of the Superfund site the federal government designated nearly 20 years ago.

It is part of a buffer zone Aerojet established to protect its neighbors from explosions that might occur in rocket manufacturing and testing.

The state's Central Valley Water Quality Control Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have certified that the surface of the highway frontage property is free of contamination and suitable for industrial development.

"The carve-out of clean land from the Superfund site is the first step toward returning this valuable property to beneficial community use," Wolfe said.

The carve-out is the most controversial change negotiated on a 1986 federal court order governing the clean-up of decades-old soil and water contamination.

In exchange for the carve-out, Aerojet agreed to fully replace water supplies contaminated by chemicals shown to originate from its activities and to do so within 24 hours. The chemicals are industrial solvents and perchlorate, an ingredient of solid rocket fuel. Perchlorate can cause cancer in adults and impairs the thyroid gland, which controls growth.

Attorneys for the county water agency and Cal-Am called Aerojet's contingency plan for water supply woefully inadequate. The utilities sought to keep the 2,600 acres in Superfund status.

The label discourages development and gives the utilities leverage to ensure Aerojet will replace contaminated water.

The changes approved Monday required GenCorp. to provide \$75,000 in financial assurances to back its pledge to replace contaminated water.

But attorneys for the utilities said that isn't good enough.

"The best financial assurance is this carve-out property," said Nancy Casale, attorney for Cal-Am. "It is extremely valuable."

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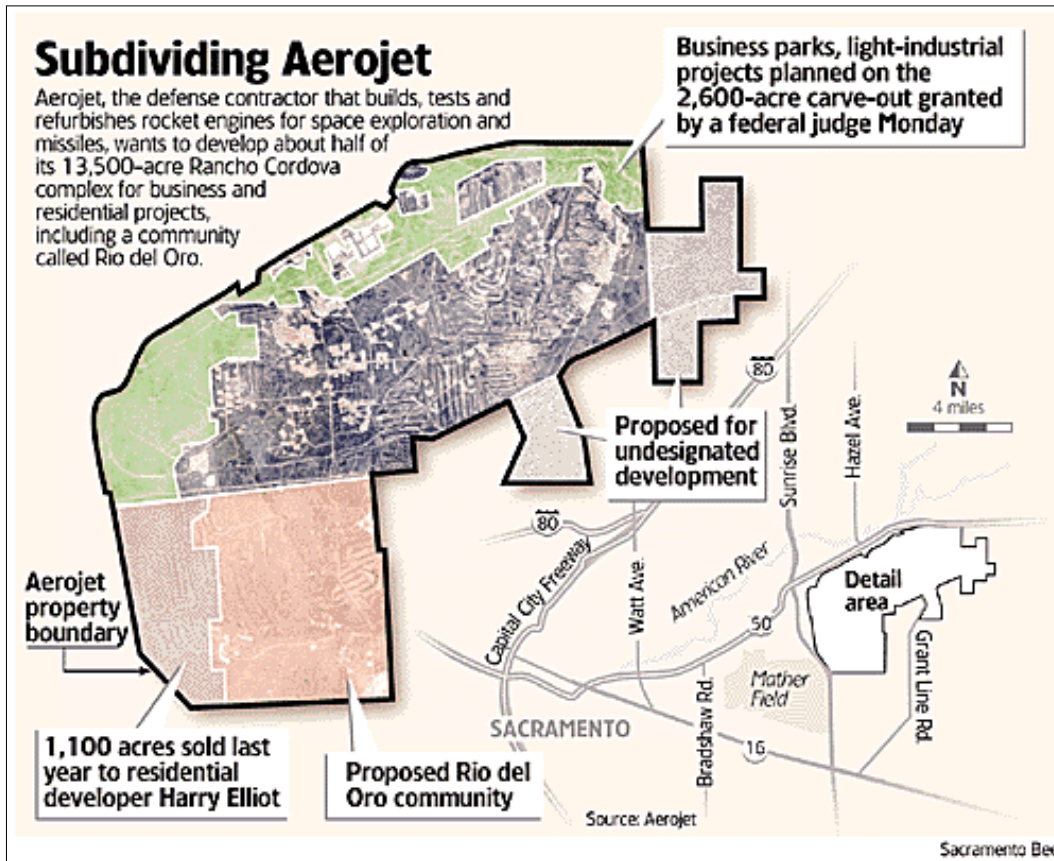
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