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State a year tardy in water standards for rocket fuel

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SACRAMENTO - Two state agencies are violating state law by delaying adoption of what would be the nation's first drinking water standards for perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel that is spreading through the state's groundwater, legislators said Wednesday.

The Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment was required to develop its public health goal a year ago, while the Department of Health Services' deadline to set standards was Jan. 1.

"Additional delay is not an alternative" despite concerns by manufacturers, the defense industry and the military, said state Sen. Byron Sher, D-Stanford, at a legislative hearing. "It's time to get on with the job."

Sher called perchlorate "the most widespread and serious public health problem facing water utilities ... today," one that is rapidly becoming a concern to agriculture as the tainted water contaminates crops.

Terry Tamminen, new secretary of the Environmental Protection Agency, said a 2002 court order delayed the setting of an initial public health goal by his agency until a second review by University of California experts.

That review was completed Jan. 12, and the EPA's Environmental Health Hazard Assessment Office now has 60 days to complete its work, Tamminen said. Once that goal is set, Health Services can set drinking water standards, he said.

Tamminen's timetable was disputed by Sujatha Jahargirdar of Environment California, who said there is no reason to delay a health goal that already has been adequately reviewed.

She and other environmentalists contend the defense industry wants to force further delay in development of standards and cleanup plans.

The Association of California Water Agencies joined the chemical industry in urging the state to wait for a study by the National Academy of Sciences later this year. Without that study, the state standards could be too low or too high, the association said.

Regulators should wait "to get the science right," said Craig Moyer, a lawyer and witness representing the chemical industry. "The idea of this being a delay tactic is ludicrous, when we're talking about a period of a few months."

Environmental groups and lawmakers countered that the federal study could take two more years or longer.

California has a particular problem with perchlorate, which can cause thyroid disorders, because of its decades-long involvement with the defense industry, military and space programs.

The contamination has shut down hundreds of California wells that tap polluted groundwater, and spawned lawsuits from thousands of people who say years of drinking water laced with the chemical have caused cancers and other illnesses. Perchlorate also pollutes the lower Colorado River, the main water source for 20 million people across the Southwest.

A coalition of environmental groups this week wrote Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger asking for swift setting of water standards, and warning that delay could hurt the state's exports of vegetables, fruit and milk produced in polluted areas. The group's letter noted Canada now requires perchlorate tests on produce from the Imperial Valley because crops there are irrigated by the Colorado River.

Setting state standards is a necessary step to requiring polluters - including the Department of Defense - to clean up the contaminated groundwater, the groups argued.

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California Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.calepa.ca.gov>

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