

GLENDALE

JPL to expand cleanup of wells

Solvent contamination continues to be found

By Richard Swearinger
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PASADENA — Toxic chemicals used at Jet Propulsion Laboratory have contaminated ground water and prompted the closure of several drinking wells, NASA officials say.

A \$1 million treatment plant built last year to remove cancer-causing solvents from four wells near the lab has reduced pollution levels to within safe drinking standards, officials say. Two other wells nearby will remain closed until a second plant is built.

JPL plans to spend \$2 million over the next two years to test 40 laboratory cesspools for contamination and drill test wells to determine how far the pollution has spread, said Joyce Jatko, chief of NASA's environmental branch. The cost of cleaning up the water won't be known until that work is done, she said.

"It could take a few years or it could take decades," Jatko said.

The lab, owned by NASA and operated by the California Institute of Technology, uses solvents

to clean metal parts and circuit boards for government-sponsored space research.

Animal research has linked the solvents to a variety of ailments, including leukemia, and cancer of the liver, kidneys and lungs, said Arnold Den, senior science adviser for the Environmental Protection Agency.

At first, pollutant levels were below state health standards. Officials were able to continue using the wells by blending the water with imported supplies.

But in 1986 the Lincoln Avenue Water Co., which serves 4,400 customers in northwest Altadena, had to shut down its two wells when contamination levels rose, said Bob Hayward, Lincoln's general manager.

Pasadena shut four of its 12 wells down in 1987, officials said.

Though lab workers now recycle solvents or ship them to landfills, for decades the chemicals were dumped into lab cesspools, officials said.

"Nobody back then looked at solvents as being a problem," said Duane Dipprey, a 38-year

veteran of the lab who is now an associate director. "I used to use them in my home."

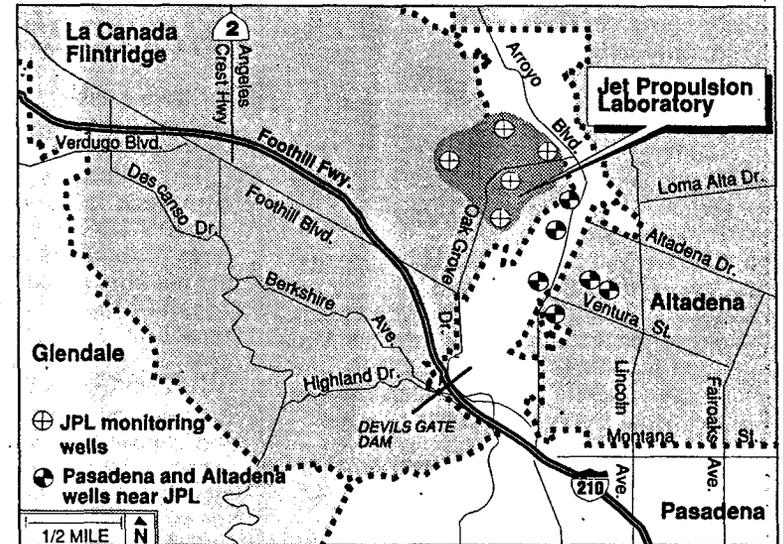
Researchers began using the dry riverbed north of the Rose Bowl in 1936, when graduate students under the direction of Caltech professor Theodore von Karman used the canyon to test early rocket motors.

During World War II, the site was used for missile tests by the U.S. Army. In 1958, the Army turned the facility over to NASA, which has operated the 76-acre lab since, developing unmanned spacecraft like Ranger, Surveyor, Voyager, Galileo and Magellan, which is orbiting Venus.

The pollution was discovered in 1980 when tests showed that four Pasadena wells within 2,000 feet of the facility were polluted with trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene (PCE) and carbon tetrachloride, said Pam Cooley, a JPL environmental engineer.

Further tests showed traces of pollution in two wells owned by the Lincoln Avenue Water Co. about a half-mile east of the lab.

In February 1990, NASA



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reached an agreement with Pasadena to pay for construction of a treatment plant, which removes the solvents by forcing air through the water.

JPL so far has refused to pay Lincoln's cleanup cost, because they say there is not enough evidence that the lab is the source of the pollution, Cooley said.

The utility plans to spend \$500,000 to build its own treatment plant this December,

Hayward said.

Pasadena water officials say they are concerned that the lab does not have a clear cleanup plan.

"It's been good they've been cooperating, but I think we're going to need to be putting pressure on them. I want surgery, I don't want a Band-Aid," said Tim Brick, Pasadena's representative on the Metropolitan Water District Board of Directors.