

Lukins rates affected by third party contamination

By Kathryn Reed

Lukins Brothers water customers are likely to have higher water bills in order to deal with contaminants in the groundwater that the company had nothing to do with.

If only it were as easy to get rid of the “stain” on South Lake Tahoe’s groundwater as it is to dry clean a blouse.

It is PCE – tetrachloroethylene – a solvent used at the old Lake Tahoe Laundry Works at the Y that is blamed for polluting the aquifer and contaminating wells used by Lukins, South Tahoe Public Utility District and Tahoe Keys Water District.

While Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board is tasked with determining who is responsible for remediation, what that would then look like and how it will be paid, progress is moving at a glacial pace.

PES Environmental out of Novato has been in South Lake Tahoe this week near the Y using “remote sensing equipment to see what the subsurface swales are like and where potential contamination is,” Jeff Brooks, an engineer with Lahontan, told *LTN*. These are screening instruments. This work will be followed up with water samples; results could be ready by the end of the month.

The state first mandated water companies test for PCE in 1989.

Lukins was the last of these three companies to be affected, with detection coming in July 2014. Since that time the family-run business that has 975 customers has been trying to solve the problem with the cooperation of the other water districts and various regulatory agencies.

Lukins lost use of four of five wells, though the biggest producing one is still in operation. Tahoe Keys had to shut down two of its three wells. South Tahoe PUD had to shut wells, but has since drilled new ones.

Lukins is in the process of requesting approval from the California Public Utilities Commission to go out for a \$2.1 million loan that would be used to build a treatment plant. In the long run, this will be cheaper so the company could stop buying water from STPUD.

At the same time Lukins is applying for a state grant that would do the same thing, and in turn would be less of a burden to the ratepayers.

The loan route would on average add \$15 to customer's monthly bills for the next 20 years. This would make monthly bills about \$91.

The public comment period has closed and now Lukins has about another week to respond to the 10 letters that were submitted regarding the loan request/rate increase.

"In general they are protesting the increase, saying the amount is too much. They say they should not pay for something they did not cause, which I agree with. But at this point and time we have to get the wells up and running," Jenn Lukins, who runs the water company, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I'm doing everything in my power to find alternate solutions, to get the responsible parties to pay, and to get a grant."

She'd like the public to direct their frustration/concerns to Lahontan and the Division of Drinking Water to prod those state agencies to do more and do it faster.

"We are working to get a plan up to our standard," Brooks, the senior engineering geologist with Lahontan, said. "We are trying to do what we can as fast as possible. These cases generally are not fast."

Some believe there have been plenty of studies, that now is the time for real cleanup of what is out there. Compounding the problem is there are at least two plumes and the original source undetermined. Even though the dry cleaners is being blamed, where exactly it oozed from is a mystery, so it's not like anyone can plug a hole or turn off a spigot.

While there is somewhat of a remediation plan in place, it is not all encompassing. Part of this has to do with the plume moving, lack of consensus if all of the contamination is from the former dry cleaner, and then who associated with that business and building should be liable.

The system in place near the site that is supposed to treat the water was offline between August and November because of a dispute with the electric bill. The state didn't learn of this until an email was sent Nov. 10 by those responsible for the remediation. The local water companies were never advised more pollutants were headed their way.