

Cabo Rojo Ground Water Contamination Site

Public Health Assessment Summary

Purpose

This fact sheet describes work the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) did to find out whether people who live in Cabo Rojo have been or could be harmed by exposure to chemicals in public water. ATSDR published a report called a Public Health Assessment that also describes what actions need to be taken to reduce harmful exposures. Because available data were limited, the Public Health Assessment focused on exposure to chlorinated volatile organic compounds, VOCs for short, in public well water.

Background

Man-made chemicals called chlorinated volatile organic compounds (VOCs) have been found at low levels in municipal drinking water supply wells in Cabo Rojo. VOCs from the well water might enter the bodies of people who

- drink the water,
- breathe in droplets of water,
- breathe in VOCs that evaporated from the water, or
- get the water on their skin.

If VOCs get into people's bodies they have the potential to cause harmful effects. Whether the VOCs cause harmful effects depends on how much is in the water (the concentration of VOCs). It also depends on how often and for how long people use the water.

So far, the source of the contamination in Cabo Rojo has not been found. The Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA) is monitoring the wells.

ATSDR's Findings

- Current exposures to VOCs in municipal water from the Cabo Rojo system are not likely to harm people's health. The public supply wells have remained within federal drinking water standards for the VOCs detected.
- Because the source and extent of the contamination have not been identified, exposures to VOCs in municipal water have the potential to harm public health in the future, depending on how much is released, how often and for how long people use the water.
- ATSDR needs more information to assess potential risks from exposure near possible source areas and use of private well water.
- ATSDR needs more information to confirm that vapors from the groundwater are not building up in homes in the area. EPA sampling in early 2012 did not show any harmful levels of VOCs in air inside buildings near possible source areas, but high levels of VOCs remain in soil beneath some buildings.

Cabo Rojo Ground Water Contamination Site *(continued from front)*

ATSDR's Recommendations

ATSDR has recommended actions that other agencies should take to protect people from exposure. In the past, other agencies generally have accepted and acted on ATSDR's recommendations.

- PRASA should continue frequent monitoring of the wells' water quality to ensure that the public water supply meets federal standards.
- EPA should continue trying to identify and characterize the VOC contamination.
- EPA should take actions to address and prevent groundwater contamination.
- EPA should develop a sampling plan to confirm that VOC levels in indoor air remain low.
- ATSDR will evaluate any additional data EPA collects and will update the findings of this PHA, if warranted.

ATSDR's Work at Cabo Rojo

The United States Congress requires that ATSDR conduct public health activities for all sites proposed for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Priority List. In October 2011, ATSDR released a draft report for public comment. The public comment period closed in January 2012. No public comments were received. But ATSDR did receive new data and toxicological information. ATSDR updated the report with this information, even though these updates did not change ATSDR's overall findings.

Since last fall, ATSDR has been working with EPA to assess possible vapor intrusion issues in homes, schools, and businesses near potential contamination sources. ATSDR's final report includes findings on these issues in Appendices.

To view the report

- The report is posted on ATSDR's Web site at <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/PHA/HCPHA.asp?State=PR>.
- A copy of the report is also at the Biblioteca Blanca E. Colberg Rodríguez, Calle Ruíz Belvis #48, Cabo Rojo.