

AZALEA POLLUTION

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"wait?" asked June Herr, 79, who with her husband, Ben, has lived in the neighborhood for 50 years. "Our lives could be endangered."

Herr and other residents west-southwest of the Tyrone Square mall area didn't learn about the contaminated groundwater beneath their homes, parks and playgrounds until March from news reports.

Since then, tests have shown eight homes near the Raytheon plant have contaminated irrigation wells. The Department of Environmental Protection, which initially said there was no risk to human health, now says the health risk is unclear.

"I can't say that it's changed, but it is certainly under investigation and review," said Getzoff, director of the department's southwest district office in Tampa.

The agency began sending out notices of contamination in 2005 to two residential complexes: Brandywine

Apartments and Stone's Throw Condominiums. The agency also notified the city, but no homeowners.

Records now show state regulators knew the chemicals were starting to contaminate the groundwater beneath nearby properties nine years ago.

A handwritten document from an Aug. 12, 1999, meeting between environmental protection and Raytheon officials makes reference to chemicals, including 1,4-Dioxane, moving offsite to the west-southwest.

Two years later, an agency staff member drafted the letter to Raytheon after reading an article in The Tampa Tribune about a new Pinellas County grant program encouraging 2,000 county water system customers to drill their own wells for irrigation.

Getzoff said she never saw, signed or sent the letter. The agency determined the county was not offering the program within the city of St. Petersburg, so it saw no need to send the letter, she said.

The Department of Environmental Protection previously has suggested the chemicals probably leaked from a waste tank at the defense plant when E-Systems owned the property before



Tribune map

Raytheon bought it in 1995. E-Systems produced electronic components for the defense and space industry, and the chemicals now showing up in groundwater are products or byproducts of the work.

However, newly obtained records show at least some of the chemicals did not leak accidentally but were deliberately disposed of in shallow pits during the 1960s.

WHAT'S NEXT

Raytheon Co. will host a community meeting on the results of groundwater pollution tests near its west St. Petersburg plant.

When: 7 p.m. May 30
Where: At the plant, 1501 72nd St. N.
Who: Environmental experts from Raytheon and independent consultants

The contamination was originally discovered at the plant in the early 1990s, while workers were building the Pinellas Trail recreation path.

Now, a growing number of test wells are showing signs of contamination. About 700 irrigation wells are within a mile of the plant. No threat to drinking water has been identified.

The state expects to receive a final assessment report from Raytheon on the extent of the groundwater pollution by May 30. A cleanup plan is due 90 days after that.

Up to now, Raytheon has said that a health risk assessment report in 2005 indicates there is no threat to public health.

The company said in a news release Tuesday that it communicated as early as 1995, the year it bought the

property, with two nearby apartment complexes.

"Raytheon takes its stewardship responsibilities to its employees and the community seriously," the release said. "Raytheon remains committed to communicating to property owners, the St. Petersburg community and public officials, and to completing any next steps in a thoughtful and thorough manner."

Last month, 500 people packed the Azalea Baptist Church to hear about the problem from lawyers suing Raytheon.

State Rep. Rick Kriseman, D-St. Petersburg, said the DEP should have told residents what was happening before they found out in March's report by News Channel 8 and the Tribune.

"The one thing I've been hearing from the community is we just want to know what's going on," he said. "And they just don't feel like they've been told what's going on."

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