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Earth Log: Valley lawsuits multiply over TCP in water

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Another dozen new Valley lawsuits have been filed over a powerful toxin found in drinking water here. Fresno, Clovis, Visalia, Bakersfield, Stockton and others already have sued over this dangerous chemical.

As I first reported in The Fresno Bee earlier this year, there soon could be hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements to clean up the cancer-linked toxin, which was a waste product from the plastic-making process.

The chemical, which was in a widely used farm fumigant, was discovered in drinking water during the 1990s. It is widespread in the Valley, and it isn't going away.

There is evidence that the chemical, called 1,2,3-trichloropropane or TCP, was added to the fumigant, instead of being properly disposed of decades ago.

It was manufactured by Dow Chemical and Shell Oil, which are defendants in the lawsuits.

TCP is far more potent than Chromium 6, which gets a lot of attention from regulators. But the media have largely ignored this story. And there is little public reaction to our coverage, even though state and federal leaders are pushing to regulate TCP.

But plenty of people in the water business are reacting to our stories. There are now two dozen public water systems suing the manufacturers and distributors.

Public water systems in Tulare and Kern counties filed lawsuits in July. In Tulare County, the systems are in Tulare, Ivanhoe, Traver, Woodville, Earlimart, London and Orosi. In Kern County, the systems are in Rosedale in Bakersfield, Lamont and Greenfield.

The manufacturers already have agreed to a \$13 million settlement in the Merced County community of Livingston. Right now, Shafter in Kern County is in court over TCP.

The lawyer who has filed most of the cases is San Francisco-based Todd E. Robins, who says Valley communities should not have to choose between clean water and affordable water.

"They have a right to both," he said.

Ancient remains

Touring the hazardous waste landfill at Kettleman Hills last week, I saw what looked like a wall of clam shells on the side of a hill where a road had been built.

We were on a desolate, wind-whipped hill, overlooking Avenal -- probably 60 or 70 miles from the Pacific Ocean. How did those seashells get into the soil out there?

Turns out, they were there a few million years, according to the environmental manager at the Kettleman Hills landfill. The area is full of fossils from the time when it was still an ancient shoreline.

Bee photographer John Walker pointed out the pattern of shells peeking through the bed of the unpaved

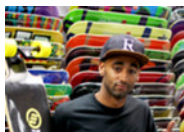
road beneath us. There must have been thousands of them.

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