

State considers cleanup of creek

Chemicals seep into Willow Springs

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SAN MARCOS — For 15 years, state officials have known toxic chemicals are seeping from a spring into Willow Springs Creek.

Now, the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission is ready to propose adding the site to the state Superfund list, qualifying it for clean-up funds.

Willow Springs Creek empties into the San Marcos River east of Interstate 35.

River lovers were surprised to learn of the contamination this week.

"You could have knocked us over with a feather," said Diane Wassenich, president of the San Marcos River Foundation. "This has been going on since 1986? What else do we not know about? This is very distressing. The (A.E. Wood Federal) Fish Hatchery draws its water close by, and the city is considering taking surface water from the San Marcos River downstream."

No chemicals have been detected in the San Marcos River, said Wesley Newberry, a TNRCC official.

However, the solvents have been found in the water and in fish near Willow Springs Creek. After 15 years of monitoring, state officials still do not know the source of the problem.

The industrial solvents tetrachloroethene, trichloroethene and 1,2-dichloroethene are all suspected carcinogens and can cause a variety of health problems. They are used in industrial applications, including dry cleaning and degreasing metal parts.

They were first detected in 1986 by the Texas Water Commission, forerunner of the TNRCC, following a gasoline spill from a United Parcel Service facility.

The shallow groundwater plume extends from the intersection of Texas 123 and I-35 toward Willow Springs Creek, east of I-35.

The contaminated groundwater emerges through springs that flow into the creek.

If the site makes it on to the Superfund list, a study will be conducted to find the source of the contamination, known as the San Marcos PCE Plume, Newberry said.

In 1997, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency studied the springs and found the chemicals, but took no action because no water wells are nearby.

But the state keeps its own Superfund site list for areas that are contaminated but are not of great enough concern to make the federal list.

The TNRCC scored the site a 12 on a scale of 1 to 50. Sites must score 28.5 or higher to be considered for the federal Superfund list, but only 5 or higher to make the state list.

One concern is that Willow Springs Creek and the San Marcos River are critical habitats for the fountain darter and the San Marcos gambusia, endangered fish species.

Texas Parks and Wildlife plans to study whether the contamination threatens the endangered species.

The TNRCC plans a public meeting to take input on possible sources of the problem and solutions. The meeting is set for 6:30 p.m. Feb. 27 at San Marcos Public Library.