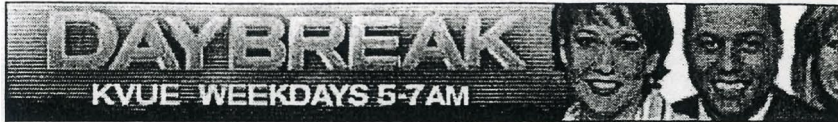


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State monitoring spread of underground chemical plume

Northwest Austin site now 11.2 acres of the Northern Edwards Aquifer

05/16/2003

By Angela Grant
Special to KVUE.com

State environmental officials are monitoring a plume of a carcinogenic dry cleaning chemical that is quietly spreading through the Northern Edwards Aquifer under Northwest Austin.

The plume poses no immediate health threat because the chemical is not in an area of the aquifer tapped by wells for drinking water, according to officials with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the state agency that monitors groundwater contamination.

Still, Jack Brown Cleaners, the company responsible for the contamination, has paid to drill 18 test wells near the dry cleaning store at Balcones Woods Drive and U.S. 183. Paul Brown, company president, said that the wells and other costs related to the plume have climbed to approximately \$650,000.



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Paul Brown, president of Jack Brown cleaners, says the contamination occurred before the chemical was classified as a health threat.

The chemical is tetrachloroethene (also known as perchloroethene, or PCE). It is commonly used to soak clothes during the dry cleaning process. It was literally dumped out the back door of the dry cleaners, state records say, and the contamination was first reported in 1996 by the dry cleaner's landlord, Yale University.

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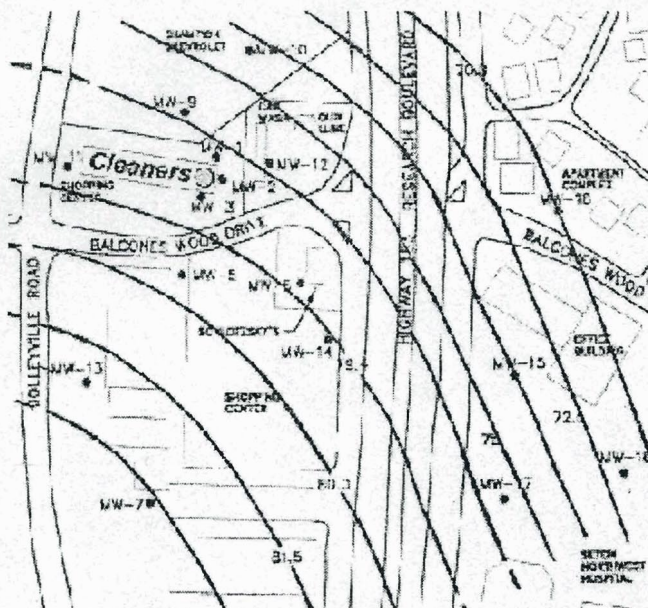
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TCEQ and KVUE.com

The red dots represent the 18 test wells that monitor the plume's dimensions.

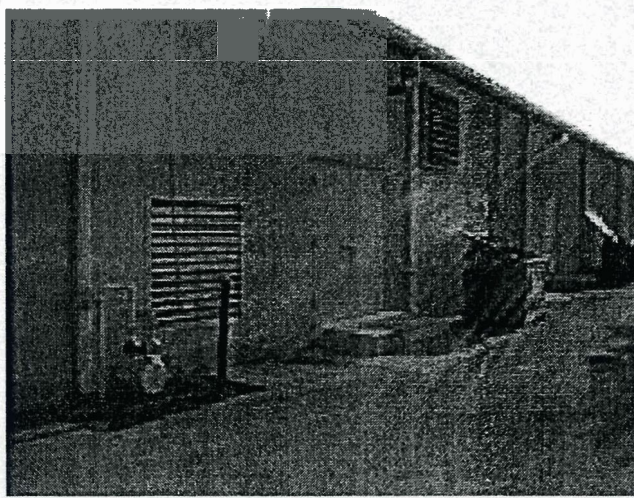
Humans are exposed to PCE when they drink contaminated groundwater, and long-term exposure to this human carcinogen can lead to liver or kidney disease, a TCEQ Technical Fact Sheet says.

As of Jan. 31, the chemical had spread to 11.2 acres of the underground water source, but there is no evidence that any has been released in area springs.

"There just was a time when people really didn't understand and didn't know that these types of contaminants stuck around for a long time, could move quickly to areas," said Nancy McClintock, manager of the city's Environmental Resource Management Division of the Watershed Protection and Development Review Department. "They had no idea that this stuff could end up in the groundwater or in a nearby stream."

Where the contaminated groundwater could discharge is a mystery because the water in the northern section of the aquifer is discharged out of many small spring outlets instead of one large outlet, such as Barton Springs, and groundwater does not always flow according to surface features, said McClintock. McClintock's office does not have jurisdiction over groundwater contamination and is not involved in the plume's monitoring. She and her staff responded to general questions posed by KVUE.com.

The aquifer is similar to an underground river that flows through large formations of rock. The water leaves the aquifer either through wells or through natural springs. Because the water moves underground, dye tracing is used to trace where it flows. In dye



flows. In dye tracing, dye is inserted into the aquifer, and its known outlets are monitored for the dye's release.

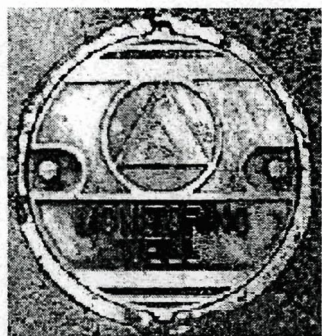
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State records say the chemical was poured out the cleaner's back door.

"In a system like this where there are so many points of discharge – unlike Barton Springs – you would be doing dye tracing studies until the cows came home trying to understand exactly what the flow paths are," said McClintock.

As part of the state's Voluntary Cleanup Program, Jack Brown Cleaners has drilled 18 wells to monitor the extent of the plume. The wells have been drilled at greater and greater distances from the dry cleaning store where the chemical was spilled. Three more wells are planned, according to records.

Tests show that 16 of 18 monitor wells contain the chemical at levels above the federally set limit for drinking water, state records show. The levels are not, however, high enough to harm aquatic life if the contaminated water were to flow into an area spring.



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Caps like these mark some of the 18 monitoring wells.

wastes off site for proper disposal. A training video teaches employees about the hazards of PCE.

Paul Brown said the contamination began in the early 1990s, before tetrachloroethene was considered a hazardous chemical. He said employees would dispose of dry-cleaning filters in the Dumpster and dump PCE-laced water outside.

"Now it is considered hazardous, and they make you go back and do the cleanup," Brown said.

Jack Brown Cleaners has since changed the policy for disposal of PCE, Brown said. An outside company hauls the hazardous

"The video refreshes employees to let them know that PCE is a dangerous chemical and must be disposed of properly," Brown said.

Jack Brown Cleaners has also replaced the old machine with a more modern machine.

A similarly contaminated site in Houston, the Jones Road Plume, is now part of the Texas Superfund Program, according to TCEQ records. People living above the Jones Road Plume rely on well water, and were therefore being exposed to PCE.

The State has since paid for water filtration systems to be installed on 24 private wells contaminated by the Jones Road Plume, according to TCEQ records.

The Jones Road Plume differs from the one in Austin because there is "no imminent health risk for the human environment" because residents of the area do not drink groundwater, said Adria Dawidczik, TCEQ spokesperson.

"All residents in the area are drinking city water, so there is not much of an effect," Dawidczik said.

It is still unclear whether a cleanup of some sort will be required or if the chemical will be allowed to degrade naturally, Dawidczik said.

The first step is using the wells to determine the contaminant's spread.

So far, the TCEQ has determined that the plume is underneath the old Academy store and Seton Hospital on U.S. 183 and is moving in a southeasterly direction. It will soon reach an apartment complex on Jollyville Road, said Dawidczik.

TCEQ records that the plume is relatively shallow, which lessens environmental damage, said Dawidczik.

"Because the plume is 25 feet deep and concentrations of PCE are not very high, and because the plume is running through a developed area, there's not much of a risk to the habitat," Dawidczik said.

Skip Cameron, president of the Bull Creek Foundation, agrees.

"It doesn't look to me that there is any threat to humans or aquatic life at the spring outlets," he said.

The Bull Creek Foundation is a volunteer nonprofit group that works with the City of Austin and the TCEQ to help conduct water quality tests on springs outlets in the Bull Creek Watershed. The group tries to ensure the quality of the water, which eventually goes to the City of Austin's water treatment plant, said Cameron.

In addition, biologists with the City of Austin or the TCEQ thoroughly inspect spring sites when Bull Creek Foundation volunteers go out to test the water. The biologists have not reported any chemical harm to plants surrounding the springs, Cameron said.

Jack Brown Cleaners is one of 300 dry cleaning companies statewide that have been involved in the Voluntary Cleanup Program since 1995, according to the TCEQ records.

Out of 18 dry cleaning companies in Austin involved in the Voluntary Cleanup Program, five are still under investigation as Jack Brown Cleaners is, and two are undergoing some sort of cleanup. The remaining 11 site cleanups have been completed.

Chuck Lesniak, environmental program coordinator for the City of

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Austin, said that the biggest deterrent to polluting by companies that handle hazardous materials is the cost of the cleanup in the event of a spill.

Companies like dry cleaners "didn't know this was a big problem, but they learn very quickly that it is not only a potentially big environmental problem, it is a very costly problem."

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