



Joint superfund project cleans Las Cruces groundwater

By Isabel A. Walters and Suzanne Michaels

“What people want to know most is whether the water is free of contaminants and safe for drinking,” says Water Resources Administrator Adrienne L. Widmer, P.E.



The short answer is yes! After going through an intense “air-stripping” treatment process at the facility, it is okay to drink the water. In fact everyone who visits the plant is invited to sample the water on-site.

Widmer spoke at the 3rd year anniversary open house celebrating the success of the Griggs and Walnut Groundwater Plume Superfund Site, which is a joint city-county effort coordinated with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED). On August 27th, the public was once again welcomed to tour the treatment site and learn more about the project.

Between 1993 and 1995, traces of perchloroethylene (PCE) were detected in the area water through regular water testing. City wells were immediately taken off-line, the plume was identified, intensely studied, tracked, and the Griggs-Walnut plant was built to remove the contaminant. The plant began operating in 2012.

“Last year we determined that more than 24 pounds of PCE have been removed so far, from the estimated 250 pounds initially contaminating the aquifer,” Widmer added.

“PCE is a man-made substance used as a degreaser, so we assume it was used for cleaning,” Widmer explained. “Our job is to clean it up and make the water safe for drinking



again; our system brings the amount of PCE down to a non-detectable level and is monitored constantly. The remediation process cleans between 8.5 and 9 million gallons of water every month.” It will likely take another 15 years to remediate that water.

“The water goes through trays with holes, kind of like a colander, through which the air gets blown into the water,” explained Paul Gamboa, senior water production operator. “The contaminant is attached to the water molecule, but when the air hits it, the PCE is separated from the water.”

“This is a very small fraction of our water system, compared to what all our wells produce,” he added.

New Mexico State University biochemistry student Gaby Rodriguez was among the members of the public who toured the facility. “I’m interested in water rights, water contamination, anything to do with water, basically,” she said. “Water is very important; it’s more precious than gold. It’s what keeps everything running. This is one of my passions. I want to be able to help people have access to clean water. People need to know about this. The technology is intriguing to learn about.”

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CUTLINES:

PHOTO 1: Paul Gamboa, senior water production operator, explains the air stripping process to resident Richard Shepan, who says he thinks the drinking water in Las Cruces tastes better now than a few years ago.

PHOTO 2: The PCE plume in 2014 (depicted here in a purple color) is noticeably smaller than it was in 2012.