

EPA report points at dairies; 307-page report says five dairies, several farms are likely source of contamination, but study is limited



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GRANGER - A long-awaited federal study released Thursday pointed at five Lower Valley dairies and several farms, calling them "likely" sources of nitrates contaminating private drinking water wells.

However, federal officials warned their study was limited and doesn't prove a larger trend of nitrate contamination across the entire 576-square-mile area southeast of Yakima known for fruit, livestock and a diverse array of other crops.

The 307-page report concludes action is needed, but that it could take years to reduce nitrate levels in residential drinking water wells to safe levels due to the extent of contamination in the Lower Valley.

The report singles out five dairies, including several whose lagoons it estimates have leaked millions of gallons of manure into the underlying soil each year.

Authors of the report, however, do not blame the region's entire nitrate problem on the dairies.

"The dairies that we sampled are the only ones we could draw this conclusion about because we didn't look at all the dairies," said Mike Cox, an Environmental Protection Agency scientist who managed the report and who was on hand at two gatherings held in Granger on Thursday to explain the report. A total of about 100 people attended the two meetings.

EPA officials are now negotiating a binding agreement with the dairy owners on ways to stop contamination and ensure clean water for downstream wells, and to drill monitoring wells, said Tom Eaton, the EPA's Washington operation manager.

The agency does not plan to levy fines, he said.

In the unincorporated areas of the Lower Valley, about 24,000 residents - a third of the region's population - rely on private wells for drinking water.

The EPA began probing contamination after a 2008 Yakima Herald- Republic series detailing how up to one in five of those wells, many of them serving low-income residents, were contaminated by nitrates. Excessive nitrates can harm infants and people with compromised immune systems and can also indicate the presence of other contaminants, such as bacteria and pesticides.

The EPA sampled 331 residential wells and found 20 percent had nitrate levels above federal drinking water standards. In 2011, the agency began looking for sources of the contamination. It analyzed 26 of those wells hoping to trace contamination back to its source.

The study found similar chemical make-ups of water from the lagoons of those dairies and downstream residential wells.

The chemicals "provide strong evidence that the dairies evaluated in this study are likely sources of the high nitrate levels in the drinking water wells downgradient of the dairies," the report reads.

The study reserved the strongest blame for dairies, naming Haak Dairy, located about four miles north of Sunnyside, and a cluster of others - George DeRuyter and Sons Dairy, Cow Palace, Liberty Dairy and Bosma Dairy, located roughly six miles north of Granger.

According to the report, the EPA estimates the Haak Dairy lagoons leak from 482,000 to 5.9 million gallons of manure into the soil every year, and the dairies in the cluster leak from 3.3 million to 39.6 million gallons per year.

The report criticized the dairies for not turning over information, such as numbers of animals, quantities of nitrogen and estimates of lagoon leakage, to EPA researchers. That prompted researchers to use general information about dairy operations, according to the report.

"EPA requested information on specific aspects of the dairy operations and the physical setting; however, the dairies in this study did not provide this information," the report said. "This information would have contributed to a more complete understanding of the dairy facilities, practices, and use of specific chemicals."

Dairy farmers and industry representatives confirmed they are working with the EPA on plans to improve, but criticized the agency's science for not sampling any septic systems, assuming all wells were the same depth and not taking into account different types of soil.

They also said the agency was unfairly singling out dairies in an area with a history of farming that goes back more than 100 years.

"It's incredibly biased and unfair for a federal agency to not just point the finger at a particular industry but at four specific family farms," said Adam Dolsen, co-owner of Cow Palace.

Dolsen also said the dairy industry contributes \$2.3 billion annually to the state economy and that his dairy has a clean track record with numerous state and local regulatory agencies.

The dairies declined to share their information with investigators because of the agency's adversarial stance early in the study, said Jay Gordon, executive director of the Washington State Dairy Federation.

Environmental advocates, meanwhile, cheered the report and called for fines.

"There has been no enforcement for any of these (dairies), it's been a free-for-all as far as water quality," said Jan Whitefoot of the Concerned Citizens of the Yakama Reservation.

Charlie Tebbutt, an environmental attorney in Eugene, Ore., said the results are no surprise to him.

"Of course, the dairies are going to look for ways out, but there is no way out," said Tebbutt, who represents environmental groups in the Yakima Valley that have targeted dairy operations.

The report also said irrigated farms are likely contributing to the groundwater pollution, and named farm operations Schilperoort Farm, Havilah Farm, Wheeler Farm, DVM Sunny Dene Ranch and Golden Gate Hops.

However, evidence against those farms isn't as strong as the dairies because researchers had trouble finding data, including information about how much water and fertilizers the farmers use, the report said. Some of the farmers shared that information and others did not, Cox said.

As for septic systems, which have been pointed to as a possible source of nitrate contamination, the results were inconclusive, the report said.

EPA researchers did not actually sample any septic systems but instead sampled three municipal waste-water treatment plants, figuring they would yield similar chemical make-ups as a personal septic system. The contaminants found in the sewage plants were not detected in the sampled residential wells, the report said.

Sunnyside resident Juan Gonzalez expressed frustration that all the science still yielded no conclusive proof about sources of contamination. Gonzalez, a city resident himself, also hoped to find help for his father to afford to drill a deeper well on his rural property.

"They're just telling us to make deeper holes," said Gonzalez.

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