



LOCAL

Tests find carcinogen in tap water at Ripon school. Maybe it wasn't the cell tower.

BY KEN CARLSON

SEPTEMBER 28, 2019 11:05 AM, UPDATED SEPTEMBER 28, 2019 11:06 AM



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John Queen picks up his daughter, a first grader, from Weston Elementary School in Ripon, CA, on Thursday, March 14, 2019. Ripon Unified School District is investigating the health of students who were diagnosed with cancer.

in Ripon, CA, on Thursday, March 14, 2019. A cellular phone tower at Weston after four years. DEKE FARROW JFARROW@MODBEE.COM

A chemical compound that is a known carcinogen was detected in the drinking water at Ripon's Weston Elementary School last March, during the same month parents were protesting a cellular tower as the possible cause of cancer cases among students.

Testing conducted for Ripon Unified School District in March found trichloroethylene (TCE) in the school's tap water. The city and state regulators have tracked TCE in the groundwater since a contaminated plume was linked to the former Nestle plant in Ripon, which for decades made decaffeinated coffee. The plant closed in 1994.

The TCE concentration was .56 micrograms per liter in a March 18 sample taken at Weston. That is above the level for reporting the drinking water contamination.



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The state places a limit of 5 micrograms per liter for TCE in drinking water and requires treatment if it exceeds that level. Still, parents who have sought answers for the cancer cases, affecting four students at Weston and two children in the neighborhood, said the school district should inform families and regularly monitor the water.

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Monica Ferrulli, whose son is battling cancer, said that RUSD released the water test results recently only after parents filed a public records request.

“The district had it the whole time,” Ferrulli said. “It is concerning because the (drinking water) standards they have now are for adults. There are no safe levels known for children. Knowing our kids have been drinking this water is very concerning.”

The school district had BSK Associates of Fresno test the water in March. About 200 parents packed a school board meeting that same month urging the district to remove a Sprint tower from

the Weston campus over concerns about cellular radiation. Bowing to pressure, Sprint turned off the tower in late March.

But water and soil contaminants were suspected in the cancer cases as well.

The RUSD had the soil tested, finding nothing unusual, and released that report at an April board meeting. The BSK report on the March drinking water tests was not released, however. The district posted the water report on its website this month after a CBS Sacramento reporter obtained the records.

Friday, the district office declined to discuss the TCE in the school's drinking water and would not say if parents will be informed. Questions were referred to the city of Ripon, which supplies water to Weston school. A top Ripon official did not return a phone message and email from The Modesto Bee on Friday.

Ripon Superintendent Ziggy Robeson has not responded to calls during the months of controversy over the cell tower and cancer cases.

Ferrulli said the school district should have frequent followup tests to keep parents informed and have filtration systems on the water faucets in school until the problems are resolved.

In reports posted on its website, the city of Ripon says it conducts monitoring for TCE and that the city's water meets drinking water standards.

Nestle has done remediation for TCE since traces of it were found in 1986. Studies have linked exposure to the industrial solvent to kidney, liver, prostate and other types of cancer. The state's Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board oversees Nestle's ongoing cleanup procedures.

In 2006, about 12 years after closure of the Nestle plant, a state order noted residual concentrations of TCE as high as 7,800 micrograms per liter in the shallow groundwater, some 1,500 times the safe drinking water standard.

Filters and pumping strategies have been used to keep city wells free of TCE contamination. Even so, the TCE level in one of the city's five wells rose close to the Environmental Protection Agency's limit within the past 2 1/2 years, prompting a shutdown of that well in October 2018.

Ferrulli said she's learned the city has used the well off and on for the past year, and the well could have been running around the time of the Weston water tests in March. More testing is needed for an accurate read on TCE in the school's water, she said.

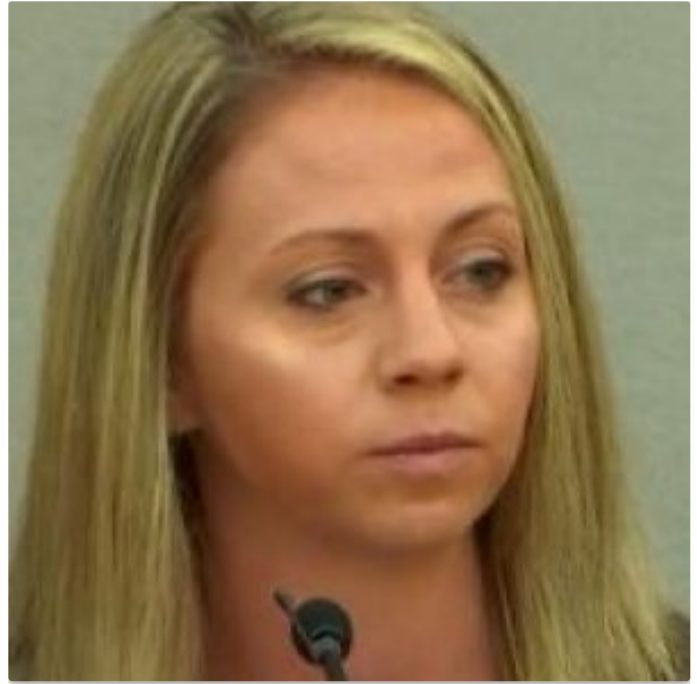
Nestle was expected to perform soil gas and water testing in Ripon this fall and a community meeting will update the public on cleanup of the TCE contamination. In a recent letter to Rep. Josh Harder, D-Turlock, the regional board said Nestle is about halfway through remediation of the toxic plume, a process that can take 50 to 75 years.

**KEN CARLSON**

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Ken Carlson covers county government and health care for The Modesto Bee. His coverage of public health, medicine, consumer health issues and the business of health care has appeared in The Bee for 15 years.

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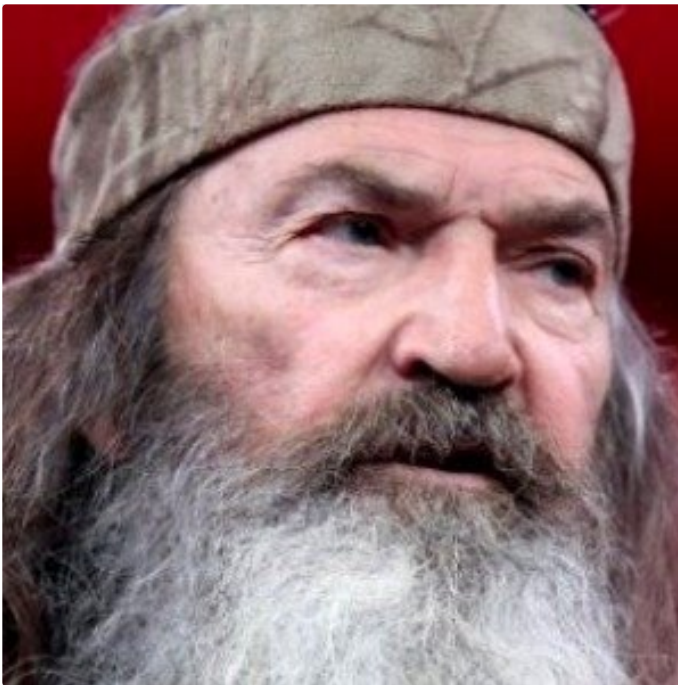
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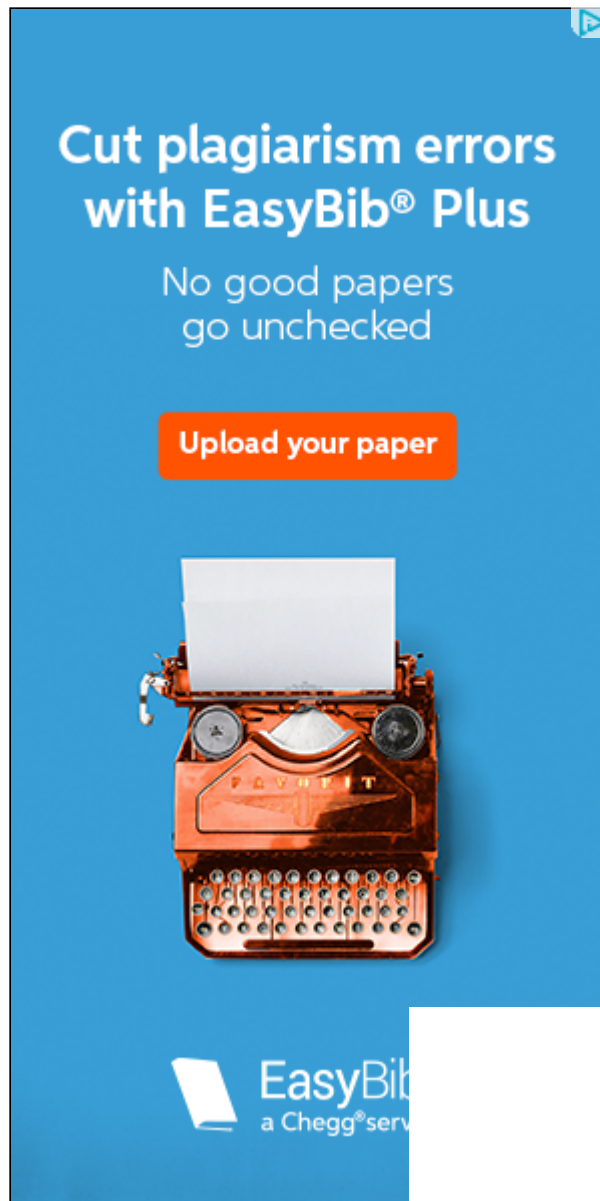
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BY ERIN TRACY

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