

Law centre boosts water fight



By Vernon Morning Star

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The fight by Spallumcheen residents to protect its drinking water source has gained more weight.

The University of Victoria-based Environmental Law Centre has filed, on behalf of the Save Hullcar Aquifer Team (SHAT), a notice to three officials at Interior Health, calling for the issue of a drinking water hazard abatement and prevention order.

The move addresses nitrate contamination in the Hullcar aquifer which is an important source of public drinking water.

The ELC is requesting IHA order "a complete and permanent moratorium on the application of liquid manure effluent" on a 210-acre field above the aquifer, owned by a dairy farmer and his family.

The field, located less than a kilometre uphill from the Steele Springs source, has been identified as a "probable source" of the contamination.

"There can be no doubt that the present circumstances amount to a drinking water health hazard," wrote lawyer Calvin Sandborn on behalf of SHAT.

"The nitrate levels, which draw from the Hullcar aquifer to supply drinking water to approximately 150 people served by the Steele Springs Water District, have measured near or above the maximum allowable limit set in the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality since March 14, 2014."

There are also 46 known wells with the Hullcar aquifer.

A Do Not Drink water advisory was issued by Interior Health in March 2014. It has been in place for nearly two years.

Testing conducted by Steele Springs show that 19 of 24 tests have recorded nitrate levels higher than 10 parts per million (PPM), which is considered unsafe.

Last month, levels were recorded at 12.8 PPM.

On at least four occasions, wrote Sandborn, the province has allowed the spraying of liquid manure onto the field.

"The health risks of nitrates have been explicitly recognized by Interior Health," said Sandborn, citing high nitrate levels in drinking water are associated with potentially fatal "blue baby" syndrome, cancer, thyroid dysfunction and impacts those with compromised immune systems.

SHAT spokesperson Al Price said having the ELC involved gives their battle more weight.

"It presents ourselves as more than a small group of people," said Price, whose group has also received letters of support from the Township of Spallumcheen, City of Armstrong, Steele Springs, Okanagan Basin Water Board and the Shuswap Environmental Action Society.

Price said his group, nor any of the residents, have any desire to shut the dairy farm down.

"We have no right to do that," he said. "But the province could work with the farm to change farm management practices that would stop the contamination of our aquifer."

IHA Health Protection has confirmed it has received the letter and is currently reviewing its contents.

"We will respond to the writers of the letter once we have the opportunity to complete our review," said Rob Birtles, Interior Health's team lead for small water systems and infrastructure

"The letter writers are aware of this. Interior Health will consider all options once the review is completed."

Birtles said Interior Health is reviewing all test results submitted by Steele Springs Water District, adding that residents living on the Hullcar aquifer have been on a water quality advisory (WQA) since 2014.

"Information on nitrates, and information on the potential effects of nitrates is contained in the WQA," he said.

The ELC has also asked information and privacy commissioner Elizabeth Denham to investigate the province's alleged failure to release government orders and test results regarding polluted drinking water, threatening hundreds of lives.

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