Groundwater threatened by chemicals, panel says

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's bountiful supplies of fresh groundwater, once believed cleansed by the filtering action of the earth, may be slowly and irretrievably poisoned by toxic chemicals now seeping into the ground, a congressional panel warns.

The House Government Operations subcommittee said Monday contamination of the nation's drinking water supplies "will be one of the most serious environmental problems of the 1980s," with the results affecting millions of Americans.

"The destruction of our nation's groundwater will continue unless we move immediately to locate all potential sources of groundwater contamination and take action to block the further flow of toxic substances into the ground," the subcommittee concluded in a report released on Capitol Hill.

Accompanying the report was a list of 250 sites around the nation where hazardous chemicals may be seeping into the groundwater.

Rep. Toby Moffett, D-Conn., chairman of the environment, energy and natural resources subcommittee, said the sites were taken from reports state governments filed with the Environmental Protection Agency.

All the sites are pits, ponds or lagoons that are unlined, having nothing to keep their contents from seeping into the earth, the subcommittee said. The sites also contain potentially hazardous chemicals and are located within one mile of a water well.

Some state listings are surprising. Florida is at the top of the list with 53 sites, while New Jersey — where problems of chemical contamination are legend — has only six sites on the list.

And while the body of the report mentions the closing of 100 drinking wells in Jackson Township, N.J., due to chemical contamination, no sites in that area are on the list.

Moffett conceded that some entries on the list may not be accurate. He said the subcommittee was forced to rely on information provided by states, and those governments varied in their understanding of what should be reported and their diligence in pursuing the task.

The subcommittee in its report said it "stresses that it is not accusing the owners or operators of specific sites of polluting the groundwater.

"The significance of this list lies in the considerable number of these sites and the fact that many of them may contain impoundments posing a significant contamination risk to groundwater," the panel said.

However, Moffett said, problems with individual listings do not affect the overall importance of the list in focusing attention on the problem of chemical contamination. He said he hoped citizen concern would force local officials to take the problem seriously.

"We felt that the sites are generally known to the states, but there appeared to be a roadblock in that we don't see any action," Moffett said.

In some areas, he said, "the whole issue is sort of pooh-poohed" by local officials who fear public alarm or who do not know what to do about contaminated water. "We have had many communities that have had their drinking water contaminated," he said.



Rep. Toby Moffett

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