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State cites El Dorado water system

Toxic metals flowed to 9,000 customers, undetected for 21 hours, after workers' error.

By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer

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State health investigators have cited the supplier of El Dorado Hills' drinking water for several safety violations that resulted in thousands of residents making a run on bottled water last month.

Operators at an El Dorado Irrigation District water treatment plant mistook a 25-ton delivery of coal fly ash, used in making concrete, for soda ash, an unharmed additive in water purification.

Cloudy water containing toxic metals from the coal ash flowed to 9,000 homes, schools and business for 21 hours on Oct. 18 and 19 before operators discovered the mishap, shut down the plant and flushed the system clean. In the meantime, customers followed the district's advice and switched to bottled water.

On Friday, a state health official confirmed the district's assessment that the coal ash did not render the water unsafe to drink.

The ash was added at an automated rate too small for laboratory analysts to detect any trace of hexavalent chromium or other metals, said Carl Lischeske, Northern California regional chief of drinking water safety for the state Department of Health Services.

Lischeske nonetheless cited the district.

"Using fly ash instead of soda ash introduced unknown concentrations of potentially toxic agents into the drinking water supplied to customers in the El Dorado Hills service area," the Nov. 7 citation stated.

Health officials cited three violations of state law: using an unapproved water treatment chemical - the coal ash; ignoring its own procedures for receiving shipments of water-treatment chemicals; and failing to obtain state health officials' approval before issuing and then lifting its precautionary unsafe water notice to customers.

Plant operators would have caught the mistake but for a disconnection in the plant's monitoring system, according to the state's findings. Devices that check water quality after the soda ash treatment were not linked to the plant's centralized control board. That since has changed.

Officials at the water district said Friday they had no quarrel with the enforcement action.

"We think we deserved it," said Steve Setoodeh, who recently took the helm of the district's facilities management in an internal shake-up over the incident.

The contamination incident prompted the district to conduct an internal investigation of its water treatment procedures "step by step," Setoodeh said. The district subsequently fired the plant operator who accepted the shipment of fly ash.

The operator failed to note that the bill of lading "clearly stated" that the material being delivered was coal fly ash, according to the state health citation.

Another plant operator was placed on paid administrative leave, the manager of the district's five water treatment plants was demoted to a plant operator and the facilities management chief was placed under Setoodeh's charge, Setoodeh said.

"We fully realize that a mistake was made in procedures, and we are taking actions to correct this," Setoodeh said.

The district learned that the trucking company that delivered the fly ash obtained it from a power plant in the California desert community of Argus, according to Setoodeh. The shipper was supposed to pick up soda ash from a supplier in nearby Trona, he said.

The state citation directed the district to take certain preventive measures by Nov. 30, some of which the district already had instigated.

The district must hire an outside expert to find out the extent to which its procedures for receiving chemical treatments have been ignored and propose improvements.

State health officials also want documentation showing that all treatment chemicals used at the district's plants for the past year were state-authorized additives.

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