

It's everyone's responsibility to stop pollution---5/15/07 (op ed)

By Sherry L. Sass

Thanks to the Nogales International for devoting so much space and excellent reporting to the recent series of articles on the Valle Verde Water Company's contaminated wells.

Dick Kamp's careful and thorough investigation not only brought out the seriousness and complexity of this troubling groundwater pollution problem, but in a "Where do we go from here" article in the May 8 issue, he emphasized the critical need for federal and binational involvement to resolve the persistent threats to the safety of our region's water supply.

That same week, a wonderful binational ground-breaking ceremony celebrated the start of the long-overdue upgrade of the Nogales International Wastewater Treatment Plant, which was the result of years of multi-agency work, binational negotiation, and citizen advocacy. The participants were right to congratulate everyone: it was a massive undertaking, and the results will benefit the whole watershed downstream of the plant. Even dwarfed as our community is by international politics and national priorities far from tiny Santa Cruz County, working diligently with our allies we can accomplish great things.

However, we can't stop now. The health of residents of Ambos, Nogales, as well as all the downstream communities, is still at risk from multiple pollution sources both domestic and industrial, as evidenced by the Valle Verde crisis. It is far easier and cheaper to prevent pollution than to fix it once it reaches the groundwater. We cannot afford for the Valle Verde well problem to be duplicated elsewhere, and we can't afford to wait to see where such contamination will crop up next. We have to stop it at the source, or sources, and soon.

It is essential to the health of the entire region that the cooperative coalition that got the Treatment Plant upgraded (and others, like the binational and Mexican agencies listed in Kamp's last article) tackle the other pieces of the water quality puzzle in our binational watershed: stopping the pollution of the notorious Nogales Wash and its tributaries, and fixing the inadequate, crumbling sewage pipe systems that not only overload the Treatment Plant but also add to the Wash's contaminant load.

Please tell your local, State, and Federal officials---those dependent on your vote to stay in office---that further groundwater contamination is unacceptable to you. The pipes must be fixed on both sides of the border, and the Nogales Wash and its tributaries cannot continue to be conduits of contamination into our water supply. The pollution source affecting the Valle Verde wells should of course be monitored and the plume eliminated. But let us not neglect prevention as the best way to safeguard our environment.

(Editor's Note: Sass is president of the Friends of the Santa Cruz River)