

Scientists: Pollution of area groundwater from mines a valid concern

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD

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The ground in southeast Lee County is porous enough to worry about mine lakes contaminating wellfields, scientists say.

That's what they thought in Dade County, too, before studies by the United States Geological Survey showed groundwater moving through aquifers much faster than thought, leaving them vulnerable to pollution.

Instead of about 15 feet a day, the scientists found carcinogenic pathogens could travel as far as 1,200 feet.

That information got a federal judge to order 6,000 acres in Dade County's Lake Belt area closed to mining, a move that heightened already heavy pressure for mining here. There are only four areas in the state where construction-quality limerock can be mined, which includes Lake Belt and southeast Lee.

The situation is different here, USGS local office director Robert Renken told a county land use group Wednesday, in part because the issue in Miami-Dade had been studied for years.

The first thing USGS scientists will do here is test the veracity of the county and other groundwater models, Renken said. That means drilling test wells and using the latest technology to track actual groundwater movement.

Renken stressed the USGS produces unbiased pure science.

"We are not consultants," he said.

Tom Missimer is. He's also a former instructor of Renken's and the guy who headed the first USGS effort at mapping local aquifers in 1973. He said that work has been updated over the years and needs to be a starting point.

Missimer said a full 78 percent of American drinking water comes from surface waters, not aquifers, and some communities like Marco Island get their water from old mine lakes.

Estero resident Peggy Schmitt said she's worried the USGS will succumb to pressure from miners and those thirsty for limerock.

"There's a tremendous amount of pressure for rock mining, and I think that pressure reverberates at the USGS," she said. "I think there is a very strong mental model that supports mining."

Renken said that's interesting, given Missimer recently emailed him, saying the opposite is true.

The Lake Belt issue in Dade County was politically-charged, Renken said, but when he works under a county contract, like he did there and like he will here, he lets the county handle the

questions.

"The strength of USGS in general is a record of unbiased science," he said.

Scott McCaleb, a Florida Rock executive, said he wants to share raw data as USGS scientists gather it.

"I think it's good to share as you progress along so stakeholders can make their own interpretation," he said.

The county continues to move toward land use changes in the 80,000-acre portion of southeast Lee where mining is allowed. A moratorium on mine applications ends in September, and the county committee on which Schmitt and McCaleb sit is working on recommendations for commissioners.

The USGS study is longer-term. It's meant to help update the county Wellfield Protection Ordinance, an update that could further restrict uses like mining.

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