

Harris County warns some near San Jacinto Waste Pits not to drink tap water

By Kim McGuire

Health officials told residents near the San Jacinto Waste Pits to drink only bottled water, for now.

Harris County Public Health has recently sent letters to some residents who live near the San Jacinto Waste Pits warning them not to drink their tap water due to the discovery of highly toxic chemicals in local wells.

The letter, which was dated July 1, said levels of dioxins had been found that "may exceed safe drinking water levels." However, because of a laboratory error, the water will need to be re-tested, local health officials wrote.

In the meantime, local health officials advised residents to drink bottled water until a second test is concluded.

It was immediately unclear how many residents were advised not to drink their water. Roughly 100 wells were recently tested near the waste pits, a submerged repository of years of industrial, toxic runoff.

Texas officials discovered the waste pits in 2005 along the San Jacinto River, between Channelview and the small town of Highlands. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determined that tugboats pushed barges of waste sludge from a Pasadena mill to the pits for offloading and storage in the 1960s.

The EPA identified several hazardous substances in the pits, including dioxins



Photo: ANNE-CHRISTINE POUJOLAT, Getty Images

- carcinogens linked to numerous potential health effects including birth defects.

In 2008, the EPA named the area a Superfund site, a designation for the country's most contaminated land and environmental emergencies.

Last month, the state announced - and Harris County commissioners endorsed - \$10 million worth of projects to be funded by a settlement agreement over the river's waste pits. Decades ago the area was used by industrial paper mills to dispose of waste, including highly toxic dioxins.

The EPA is nearing a decision about

how to manage the site. One proposal calls for leaving the buried waste there.

Jacquelyn Young, who grew up near the pits and now runs the San Jacinto River Coalition, said the discovery of dioxin in groundwater wells is further proof the waste should be completely removed from the site.

She received a copy of the warning letter from the widow of a man who lived near the site and died of cancer at age 39.

"She said all of her worst fears are coming true," Young said of the widow.