

Foul water problems being solved

by Soren Wuerth
for the Tundra Times

Residents of Tooksok Bay and Marshall are hoping the state will help restore clean water to their villages after leaking fuel contaminated the soil in both places and fouled drinking water, village administrators said.

Marshall, a town of about 300 located in Western Alaska on the lower part of the Yukon River, will ask for emergency relief aid Friday when they meet in Anchorage with state officials.

Marshall's water problems began a few weeks ago, when a new water system was being modified.

The state's Public Health Service was building a water tower and installing new pumps and water lines when gasoline somehow seeped into a "zone of depression" or lowered part of the water table, according to Paul Pinard, the area supervisor for the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Teachers at the school noticed the odor of gasoline and contacted the DEC. Lab tests confirmed that the water was contaminated.

The most likely source of the contamination is an old gasoline storage area, Pinard said.

Several children and elderly residents of Marshall have developed

a rash, said Richard Oney, the city manager. But according to a health aide at the village clinic, it will take 15 to 20 years before symptoms from gasoline exposure become detectable.

In Tooksok Bay, residents are trying to get more information on a 4,000-gallon diesel fuel spill.

Most of the village's 400 residents are angry that they weren't informed by the Lower Kuskokwim School District about fuel that leaked from outside an elementary school in the Yupik Eskimo town on the Bering Sea, said Mayor Felix Lincoln.

"The school district's not talking to

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us. They are saying things on their own. They're keeping quiet," Lincoln said.

In November, a broken pipe caused fuel to seep into the gravel beside the school. When the weather turned colder, several buildings lost their heat and their water pipes burst causing the town's holding tank to run dry.

Tooksok Bay was forced to use a back-up tank for their water, which likely drew in contaminants from the diesel-soaked gravel, Pinard said.

The DEC had told the village not to use the alternative tank months ago, said Mike Frank, the LKSD's director of plant facilities. However, it was the only option available and the town would have been worse off if the tank hadn't been used, he said.

Meanwhile, villagers have been using creek water, which is unhealthy as well, Pinard said. The water contains

bacteria and must be boiled 10 minutes before using.

Officials at LKSD failed to notify villagers of the fuel leak until after they began using the other well.

"Our normal route of notification is through the DEC," said Frank. "There were some problems with our communication with the village, weather delayed people getting into Bethel (where LKSD is located) and our management staff was not in Bethel."

The school district will negotiate with Tooksok Bay to determine which entity will pay for the clean-up costs, Frank said. LKSD has already invested \$20,000 with its contracted engineering firm, Hart Crowder Inc.

"(LKSD) is not taking responsibility for the spill," Frank said. "We are working with the city to get the system back in operation."