

Aquifer receives special EPA label

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By JEFFREY MIZE, Columbian staff writer

A huge aquifer that provides Clark County with most of its drinking water will receive an extra layer of federal protection.

The Environmental Protection Agency this week designated the Troutdale aquifer, which underlies the western half of Clark County, as a "sole source aquifer."

The decision means some projects receiving federal funding will be reviewed for potential effects on the aquifer.

Martha Lentz, the EPA's sole source aquifer program manager in Seattle, said the agency typically reviews large projects. It also has evaluated smaller projects, such as drilling a well or installing a septic tank at a freeway rest area, she said.

One example of a larger project was in the late 1980s, when the EPA suggested changes to plans for straightening an S-curve on Interstate 405 in the Renton area because of the potential effects on an aquifer there, Lentz said.

"There's been a number of them where we have made suggested changes," she said. "It depends on the project."

50 percent threshold

Projects that are funded entirely by state, local or private dollars will not receive EPA review.

The federal government defines a sole source aquifer as one that provides at least 50 percent of the drinking water consumed in an area where there are no alternate sources that could physically, legally and economically supply drinking water.

With this week's decision, the EPA has designated 14 sole source aquifers in Washington.

The designation was in response to a petition filed by Columbia Riverkeeper, the Rosemere Neighborhood Association and a group of county residents in November.

Columbia Riverkeeper is a nonprofit conservation group with members and volunteers throughout the Portland-Vancouver area. Brent Foster, the group's executive director, said the EPA essentially has acknowledged that groundwater underneath Clark County is a significant resource.

The Rosemere Neighborhood Association was stripped of its status as a city-recognized neighborhood association in January 2004. The group continues to function and remains active in water protection efforts, however, despite the city's decision to recognize the Rose Village Neighborhood Association covering the same area.

Dvija Michael Bertish, chairman of the Rosemere Neighborhood Association, called EPA's decision a "common sense measure."

"This is the only water we have to give to our families," Bertish said in a statement. "It only makes sense to do everything we can to protect it."

Clark County and the city of Vancouver sent letters to the EPA that, while not opposing the designation, questioned whether it was necessary, Lentz said.

"The designation is our response to the public, citizens down there and their petition," Lentz said. "The necessity of it is not a criteria."

The EPA did not consider the adequacy of existing groundwater protection and aquifer recharge laws in Clark County and its cities.

"They really aren't that relevant in our decision," Lentz said. "When we decide to designate an aquifer, it's really based on the technical merits."
