

Bad water being blamed on cheese company

By Jane Kay, Environmental Health News

HILMAR -- A century ago, a band of Swedish families settled in California's Central Valley, attracted by land that cost \$25 an acre and life-sustaining water from the gushing San Joaquin and Merced rivers.

The Mords, the Ahlems, the Nymans and the Wickstroms started dairy farms, milking cows and growing oats and corn for feed. The settlers, joined by Portuguese immigrants, relied on one another to tend irrigation canals and survive choking dust storms and crop-stripping plagues of jackrabbits and grasshoppers. In 1984, to add value to their milk, descendants created an enterprise that grew into Hilmar Cheese Co., one of the world's largest cheese producers.

Now, much of the well water around the cheese plant, located in the agricultural heart of California, isn't fit to drink.

New documents show that the cheese is the likely culprit in spoiling at least 18 water wells – probably more – in and around Hilmar. High in nitrates, arsenic, barium and salts, the well water tastes bad and violates federal health standards, increasing the risk of cancer and other health problems.

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