

# Algae causing strange taste, smell in Santa Ynez Valley water

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Algae is to blame for complaints of a funny taste and smell coming from drinking water in the Santa Ynez Valley.

The blue-green algae, contained in water delivered from the State Water Project, produces methylisoborneol, or MIB, an organic chemical that creates an earthy or mossy taste, said John Brady, the Central Coast Water Authority's deputy director of operations and engineering. "They are naturally occurring chemicals, and there are no health effects, but people can sense it."

The same chemical can be a factor in cork taint in winemaking.

The problem was first detected late last week and the Central Coast Water Authority's treatment facility has been able to remove about half of the MIB.

However, Mr. Brady said, more specialized equipment is required to eliminate the chemical altogether.

That equipment, he said, is scheduled to arrive sometime today, and once installed will begin treating the water immediately, but customers in the Santa Ynez Valley may not taste or smell the effects until sometime Tuesday.

"The most important thing is, we really want to assure the public that the water is thoroughly disinfected, it is safe and it will not harm you," Mr. Brady said. "Our team is working very hard to eliminate this from our water."

Officials of the Central Coast Water Authority and the California Department of Water Resources are working to identify the exact source of the algae.

The drought is likely a major factor, because small amounts of water moving through the statewide pipeline system increase the probability of algae growth, Mr. Brady said.

The last time the State Water Project experienced a similar phenomenon was back in 2004, when a levee break in the San Joaquin River Delta led to an algal bloom, Mr. Brady said.

Water purveyors in Solvang and Santa Ynez are getting the most complaints about water quality. Because customers in the Santa Ynez Valley receive the highest concentration of state water, they are more likely to taste and smell the MIB.

Those on the South Coast may not notice it at all, because the state water is placed into Lake Cachuma before it is delivered to customers in Goleta, Santa Barbara, Montecito and Carpinteria.

"The water delivered from Lake Cachuma is a blend of state and Cachuma project water. The contaminant levels detected by CCWA are expected to be near non-detect levels due to the blending with Cachuma project water," said Tom Mosby, general manager of the Montecito Water District.

However, South Coast customers may experience some taste and odor issues due to other factors.

"We have been monitoring the organics in the surface water to see if the additional sunlight reaching the bottom of the lake (Cachuma) is developing any plant growth," said Chad Hurshman, the Montecito Water District's treatment and production superintendent. "We have also sampled the well water at a much greater frequency because of the depleting aquifer volumes."

"I do anticipate possible changes in the influent water quality as we get closer to the end of summer."

In Santa Barbara, customers were told recently to prepare for changes in the taste and smell of their water as the city moves toward using more groundwater to meet demand.

Cathy Taylor, the city's water system manager, said the groundwater is treated and meets all state and federal quality standards, but simply tastes and smells different than the surface water.

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