

Whelton questions where that time frame came from—the standard in Santa Rosa and in the PID area has been 72, he said.

“It is my understanding that the City of Santa Rosa, which experienced water distribution system contamination after the Tubbs Fire, required a 72 hour ‘soak time’ of all infrastructure before water was sampled,” he wrote in a March 11 letter addressed to the DDW’s Reese Crenshaw, who was named by Del Oro officials as their point person but was unavailable to speak with the CN&R. “It is also my understanding that this 72 hour soak time approach was overseen by the DDW and EPA during support to Santa Rosa. The concern at that

system,” he told the CN&R back in February (see “Widespread contamination,” Newslines, Feb. 28).

In March, the county issued a warning to anyone living in standing homes in the Camp Fire zone that their houses’ plumbing systems themselves might be contaminated. Del Oro maintains that standing structures in its district are safe.

Since he first came to Butte

County to consult on PID’s Camp Fire response, Whelton’s been clamoring for testing to search for more than just benzene. He’s brought his concerns to Del Oro, Butte County Public Health and numerous state agencies. While that chemical is known to be present in



time was that if a shorter soak time was permitted, any [volatile organic compounds] that were present in the plastics, including benzene (and others which were present), would not have enough time to leach from plastics into water for detection.”

Del Oro also is offering to test standing homes at owners’ request, at cost: \$70. That testing involves one sample taken from the kitchen sink, Roberts said, “on the fly,” meaning without any soak time. The test performed at the Gardners’ property also was “on the fly.”

“We want to get an accurate representation from the location used most,” Roberts said.

Another procedure Roberts and O’Farrell said was OK’d by the water board that Whelton says is inadequate: “You can take one water sample at the kitchen faucet, but there’s no evidence that that will predict contamination in your hot water heater—it’s a completely different

Plastic water meters are the norm, but they were not able to withstand extreme heat during the Camp Fire. Del Oro officials say they plan to put in new plastic meters as residents rebuild and rehook to the water system. In contrast, Paradise Irrigation District is now using a combination of metal and concrete.

plastic plumbing, it’s also an indicator that other potentially hazardous compounds are present. That is why the DDW says its standard is to test for benzene only, Newton said. Whelton doesn’t dispute that the chemical is an indicator, but says it shouldn’t be the sole target of testing, as it doesn’t historically rule out other potentially harmful contamination.

Whelton outlined his argument for wide-panel testing for volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in his letter to Crenshaw: “Specifically, benzene was sometimes ‘not-detected’ (<0.5 ppb) when tert-butyl alcohol (TBA), a VOC, was found above its California drinking water

notification level of 12 ppb. TBA is regulated in drinking water by the DDW. Therefore, benzene did not indicate contamination for all regulated VOCs in Santa Rosa.”

Put more bluntly, Whelton told the CN&R: “Not having benzene in the water doesn’t mean you’re safe.” Taking Whelton’s advice, PID is testing for dozens of VOCs and has gotten results above healthy levels for a number of them.

The CN&R learned this week through public records requests that the water board back in December and January received tests results indicating the presence of other toxic chemicals, including lead. The water board dismissed the lead contamination, as testing came up positive only before treatment. (The before and after tests were taken two weeks apart.)

In 2016, Whelton penned an article for online science news-magazine Undark in which he said he was furious about what was happening in Flint, Mich., where people were poisoned by exposure to lead in their water. He says the sentiment still rings true today.

“Since 2014, my colleagues and I estimate that roughly one million Americans have been provided toxic drinking water at their taps,” he wrote then. “[I]n what has become an epidemic of misinformation, poor testing protocols, and dangerously ignorant, bureaucratically bungled science, they, too were told that their drinking water was safe, only to find out later that it harmed them—or that officials did not really know what chemicals or other toxins were present in the water, despite having first declared it safe.”

He’s still urging government agencies to take charge on behalf of their citizens. The local water districts don’t have the expertise to create protocols, so they need guidance from the state that ensures the protection of the public, Whelton said.

“The failure of the state Water Resources Control Board to equally protect people in Butte County that are served by two different water systems that were affected similarly doesn’t make sense to me,” he said. As for Del Oro, whose customers have been told their water is safe despite tests coming up positive for benzene: “They’re trying their best, I believe, but this is their first time.

“My thought is that they’re trying—but trying’s not good enough because people can still get hurt.” □

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