

Ms. Sylvia Hamilton

Chair  
Perchlorate Community Advisory Group

President  
San Martin Neighborhood Alliance

Appointed Member  
San Martin Planning Advisory Committee

Testimony  
Before the Subcommittee on Water and Power  
Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on  
H.R. 4459 Llagas Reclamation Groundwater Remediation Initiative  
June 23, 2004



# PCAG

## Perchlorate Community Advisory Group



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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee and staff. My name is Sylvia Hamilton and I am Chair of Southern Santa Clara County's Perchlorate Community Advisory Group (PCAG), President of the San Martin Neighborhood Alliance (SMNA) and a member of the San Martin Planning Advisory Committee (SMPAC). The members of each of these groups have given me a vote of confidence to speak on their behalf. Specifically, I represent residents of this community, which has been hard hit by the Perchlorate groundwater contamination. As a 28-year resident of San Martin and retired Morgan Hill Unified School District math teacher, I consider it a privilege to volunteer my time and dedication to protecting the vision of the residents, which is to protect and enhance the quality of life for this beautiful rural-residential community.

I want to thank you for holding this hearing on H.R 4459, the Llagas Reclamation Groundwater Remediation Initiative, to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to participate in funding the implementation of a balanced, long-term remediation program. I thank Congressman Pombo for his aggressive efforts to restore the quality of life to the residents of our community. Today I would like to share "A Taste" of what it has been

like to live with a contaminated water supply, as well as address areas where we desperately need your expertise and assistance.

On January 16, 2003, residents were shocked by the press release – “Perchlorate Contaminates South County Wells”. Wells are our only source of water! We were shocked to discover that for over 40 years this Perchlorate plume had been spreading through our beautiful, quiet valley where we all felt so safe. Our most valuable resources – our water – our children – had been, and are still being, compromised. So many questions – so many unknowns! Fear, anger, frustration -- emotions ran the gamete. We all felt helpless! We had trouble even pronouncing the word Perchlorate much less understanding health risk involved or remediation possibilities. People were frightened! For months, I received over 75 phone calls and 120 emails each and every day. I’m glad that our grass roots organization, the San Martin Neighborhood Alliance, had the respect of the community. Residents knew someone they felt comfortable calling.

It is extremely difficult to estimate how many people are actually affected by this issue and to what degree. Sure we know that 800 homes are receiving bottled water, over 1000 homes are now on municipal systems with treated water and the plume is about 10 miles long. However, we also know that the plume does not stand still and that people move in and move out, as well as, visit various communities. Some of the concerns that I have heard are as follows: When will the contamination get to my well? Are they sure my well is not contaminated? Is it safe to eat produce from my garden or the store? Are our family members/friends health problems related to this contamination? Are our animal’s health problems caused by Perchlorate ingestion? Etc. I receive calls, on a regular basis, from people both inside and outside of the contamination area.

Fear is probably as hazardous to ones health and quality of life as contaminants. The favorite breeding ground of fear is the dark unknown. Some people were afraid to even let their children use the water for baths or for swimming pools. That may seem way out there but, the truth is, fear is very consuming especially when it threatens your children and our most sensitive populations. The best way I know to relay a little of the feelings people have is to remind all of us of the way we handle being in a country where we cannot use the water for ice, drinking or to brush our teeth. It might be fine for a little while but sure is nice to get home. Also, what if you unknowingly gave contaminated water to your children or drank it while pregnant??? It is very scary but, the truth is, these people would not have these fears if the contamination did not exist.

We appreciate the efforts of the Water District who stepped up to the plate early on to provide bottled water. They also sponsored a Community Outreach Meeting on February 12 with panelist from the Regional Board, County Health and County Agriculture. Around 800 people packed into the rooms available but the same amount or more were outside, unable to enter and very angry. Only one piece of reassuring information came across that evening – Perchlorate washes out of the body within 72 hours after last intake. However, we also were told it would take decades to clean up the aquifer. When I left the meeting that night, I had one thought in my mind – it was not acceptable for the people in this community to wait decades before they had peace of mind when they turn on their faucets! We would find another way.

I am very grateful to all who stood before our community that evening. I know it was not easy but it did let people know someone cared and it definitely got the wheels of investigation moving. For the next few months, numerous community members worked very hard to gather information and network with various stakeholders. Education and open communication are the keys to successful, effective, timely problem solving.

In April, the Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) took the very important step of creating the Perchlorate Community Advisory Group (PCAG) of which I was elected Chair. The mission of PCAG is to advise the RWQCB regarding appropriate actions and timelines that are designed to find timely solutions to the Perchlorate contamination issue. These recommendations address immediate, interim and long-term clean-up solutions, as well as, effects of Perchlorate on humans, animals and produce. About half of the committee members are residents of San Martin, Morgan Hill or Gilroy and represent various groups and expertise such as farming, ranching, medical, real estate, chemistry, geology, equestrian, veterinary, San Martin Planning Advisory Committee, San Martin Neighborhood Alliance, Lions Club and members with prior contamination committee work-experience. PCAG also receives outstanding technical assistance from our County and State Agency members such as the State Electeds Staff, Regional Water Quality Control Board, Santa Clara Valley Water District, County Health, County Agriculture, West San Martin Water Works, San Martin County Water District and an EPA based research team from Oregon State University. The responsible party, Olin Corporation, has attended two of our monthly PCAG meetings to provide presentations regarding on- and off-site remediation evaluation reports. With Olin's document support, we have set up websites and repositories for residents to review all work plans, progress and reports. We work regularly with the local press to keep

community informed about meetings, repository locations, websites and work progress. Community involvement and input is a vital component of this effort.

Also in April, the County Health Department established a Perchlorate Medical Advisory Group. Members read, analyzed and discussed numerous research studies related to Perchlorate health effects. Community repositories were established and publicized so residents could easily access this information. A County Epidemiologist presented local neonatal thyroid test results but the sample set was not large enough to be statistically valid. This is one of the reasons that we need a Comprehensive Health Risk Analysis.

PCAG and PMAG have overlapping members, which promotes regular exchange of information including expert testimony from the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Health Services and Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment Agencies. Both groups have healthy working relationships with open, responsive communication and persistent determination on the part of all to find timely solutions and keep the community involved and informed. Everyone has dedicated tremendous time, energy and money to find viable, timely solutions to this issue. Being part of the solution, instead of adding additional layers to the problem, is everyone's goal.

So where are we now after almost a year and a half? A great deal of work has been done such as thousands of wells sampled, Tennant site groundwater and soil remediation action plans in place and over 1000 homes receive treated water from company or municipal wells with ion exchange systems. Nevertheless, the 750 affected domestic wells have not been addressed. Approximately 800 homes are still receiving bottled water and even that is not problem-free. The bottles weigh about 50 pounds and many residents cannot carry them much less mount them on the dispenser. At June's PCAG meeting, the Olin Corporation consultants did present their alternative water replacement evaluation and stated the best solutions appear to be point of entry and/or wellhead treatment. That is very good news but they have no intention of implementing any plan until there is an adopted State or Federal Standard. They also did not address agricultural wells or wells below 6ppb in this report.

From the beginning, we have been very fortunate that State and Federal elected representatives have been actively involved and have vowed to support our community whenever possible. We are at the point where we must ask for your support and are grateful that you are considering

dedication of monies for implementation of a balanced, long-term Perchlorate remediation program.

In your deliberations, please note that the community definitely expects the Olin Corporation to continue to take responsibility for the cost of the Llagas Basin remediation. We also expect utilization of additional monies to primarily concentrate on those most directly affected by this contamination.

We request that your top priority for funding consideration be wellhead technology for the contaminated domestic wells in unincorporated Llagas Basin. Remediation of these wells will have two major benefits: 1) approximately 2000 people will have their source of water restored and 2) the groundwater aquifer remediation will prevent further migration of the contaminated plume. The first step in this priority must be identification, evaluation and certification of new and previously proven Perchlorate removal technologies. We need access to the best technology possible. We request that the certification process be developed and streamlined for timely results and fee-friendly for applicants. We also request that emphasis be placed on technologies with limited hazardous waste and that demonstrate cost effective installation, operation and maintenance.

A Comprehensive Health Risk Analysis is also a priority. This analysis must be a through study of the short-term and long-term Perchlorate effects on humans and animals, including all pathways. Emphasis needs to be placed on the effect of Perchlorate on our most sensitive populations, i.e. fetuses, young children, pregnant women, elderly, persons with thyroid conditions and immune-challenged individuals. Also, agriculture obviously is a very important component of a stable State and Federal economy. We must work together to protect produce for human consumption, as well as our agricultural economy.

We also request that priority status be placed on the establishment of a Federal Standard that is based on the best scientific information available. We have a great deal of respect for the work preformed by the Environmental Protection Agency and would like to see their position move forward. In the interest of public health and safety, it is vital that those involved in setting this standard be free of any conflicts of interest.

In summary, identifying the best Perchlorate removal technologies possible, a Comprehensive Health Risk Analysis and establishment of a Federal Perchlorate standard will benefit our Llagas Basin community, as well as our State and the entire Country.

If I had my way and you had yours, this problem would have been taken care of long ago. But it wasn't and we cannot change that. As a result, we must take charge of the present and thereby protect the quality of life for current and future generations. We must be part of the solution. Together We Make a Difference!

Thank you for your attention, consideration and support.