

# Former water engineer says Gallo's Fresno contamination should be cleaned up

By Mark Grossi



The regional water board will tighten rules for E&J Gallo in Fresno, pictured above along Clovis Avenue at Olive Avenue, but a retired water engineer says it's not enough. The winemaker needs to clean up an old pollution plume underground, the engineer says. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Tainted water in southeast Fresno

- Authorities are tightening regulations on Gallo wastewater, but some discharges will continue to land.
- A former state water engineer says the winemaker should clean up an underground pollution plume.
- Gallo has invested millions of dollars in wastewater cleanup at its Fresno winery.
- State and city officials say they don't see a big impact from the slow-moving plume.

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More than a decade ago, [E&J Gallo Winery's](#) pungent operation at Olive and Clovis avenues was known all over southeastern Fresno. But the world's largest winemaker had a decades-old problem well below the public radar — an old plume of dirty groundwater.

Gallo addressed composting and other issues years ago, eliminating the stench and the complaints. But underground, the plume remains, slowly moving toward Fresno wells that provide drinking water.

The tainted water has sparked a debate, pitting a retired water engineer against her former employer, the [Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board](#), which regulates Gallo. The board next month [proposes to tighten](#) longstanding rules for the Modesto-based winemaker, but the proposal stops short of ordering a full groundwater cleanup.

Authorities say the plume moves slowly over many years and is not causing big problems.

“It takes many years, sometimes decades, for a water quality problem to develop,” said Lonnie Wass, Fresno-based supervising engineer with the regional board. “The plume is being monitored.”

That’s not good enough, says Jo Anne Kipps, a senior water resources engineer who worked 12 years at the regional board before retiring.

She objects to the [proposed regulations](#) that would allow Gallo to continue discharging some tainted water to the company’s surrounding farm fields. She says there is no proof that the continued discharges will not add to the plume, adding that Gallo has been discharging wastewater to land for six decades.

“Formal enforcement is necessary,” Kipps said. “A cleanup and abatement order should be issued.”

Kipps is the only person commenting on the proposed discharge regulations. The proposal is scheduled before governing members of the regional board next month. Kipps faces an uphill fight about an area of Fresno where there are a lot of water contamination sources, not just Gallo.

And the issue is surrounded by powerful voices, including internationally known Gallo, the city of Fresno and state water authorities — none of whom are siding with Kipps.

Taking steps at cleanup

Gallo has invested in cleanup, says the regional board. The company spent more than \$13 million on a treatment plant for its wastewater, and most gets shipped to the city’s treatment plant.

Under the new regulations, Gallo estimates it will discharge 356 million gallons of wastewater to the city’s treatment plant each year, leaving about 54 million gallons to be used on fields where Sudan grass, forage and vineyards are grown. The plants will absorb a lot of the contamination, which is in the form of nitrogen.

In 2011, Gallo sent more than 85% of its wastewater to the city’s treatment plant. Gallo and regional board staffers say it would be safer to discharge all the wastewater to the [Fresno-Clovis Regional Wastewater Reclamation Facility](#), but the city’s pipeline system is not large enough to handle the flow.

Chris Savage, senior director of global environmental affairs for Gallo, said the company has not been adding to groundwater problems. Instead, the company has focused on maintaining water quality.

“We have made a big investment, and we have a good relationship with Fresno,” he said. “We want to be a long-term player here.”

Gallo produces wine, brandy spirits and juice concentrate as well as compost at its Fresno site.

The regional water board report took into account Gallo’s contributions to the area. The report said the proposed regulations would not threaten future benefits offered by Gallo, which employs 250 people and buys \$210 million worth of grapes from Fresno-area growers.

The report also says Gallo provides a tax base for local and county governments, and contributes more than \$100,000 annually to educational and charitable causes in Fresno.

Gallo’s 700-acre Fresno site — one of its nine wineries throughout California and Washington — was purchased in

1953, according to state authorities. Gallo uses 433 acres as cropland where some wastewater is discharged, authorities said.

## Pollution sources

In further support of the state's recommendations, the city's public works director, Thomas Esqueda, said there are many sources of pollution in southeast Fresno, meaning there are other suspects in the groundwater pollution.

The area is notorious for groundwater problems, including a plume of nitrates from former dairies and other [chemical contamination from Hammer Field](#), the old military base at the Fresno-Yosemite International Airport.

But three city wells near Gallo have been affected by contamination, according to city records. Two of them have been shut down since 2003. Contaminants have been detected in the third, but not in violation of any drinking water standard.

Kipps said the Gallo plume needs to be further detailed to understand exactly where it is, but monitoring has shown its location and the direction it is moving — west.

The plume contains salts and [nitrates](#), which come from septic systems, sewage treatment, fertilizers, dairies and decaying vegetation. High concentration of nitrates can cause a potentially fatal blood disease in infants.

In the Gallo environmental documents, models are used to show there would be no additional harm to the groundwater in the application of some wastewater to the land. Kipps said there was no way to prove that yet without actual monitoring data.

She said the concentrations of salts and decomposable debris from grape crushing and pressing operations can be 15 to 25 times higher than untreated municipal sewage.

Even if the concentration was reduced by 90% during land spreading, the water seeping down to the groundwater still would be greater than municipal sewage, she said.

"They (Gallo) need to prove they aren't contributing to the problem," she said. "They have assumptions and models to support what they're saying, but unless you can demonstrate it with data, you haven't proven it."

So is the water in southeast Fresno safe to drink? Esqueda says the city pays a lot of attention to keeping water quality in line with standards, and it meets the standards in southeast Fresno.

He added that groundwater contamination is no stranger in other parts of Fresno. Esqueda said it is found in places such as Old Fig Garden and Fort Washington.

The city closely monitors wells and uses hefty filters to trap certain chemical contaminants, such as [DBCP](#). For nitrates, the city might shut down the well temporarily or blend its water with supplies from a cleaner well.

Throughout Fresno, the city has removed 10 wells from service because of elevated nitrate levels, Esqueda said.

"We are required to provide safe drinking water that complies with the maximum contaminant levels," he said. "We do that throughout the city."

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