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Monday, March 3, 2003

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Gasoline spills threaten water supplies

Fuel additive highly toxic

BY ERIKA ROSENBERG
Albany Bureau

Twice a week, Dan Whalen drives a quarter-mile to fill 10-gallon jugs with drinking water from a tanker truck that's been supplying water to his neighborhood for more than two years.

Whalen, who lives in Hyde Park, Dutchess County, doesn't drink the water from his taps because the wells in his neighborhood were contaminated by one of the state's biggest spills of gasoline and MTBE, a highly toxic chemical additive. MTBE, or methyl tertiary butyl ether, is also a suspected carcinogen.

The problem is not isolated to downstate communities. Hundreds of similar spills threaten water supplies throughout the state, including 29 in Broome County. With fewer than 12 percent of MTBE spills cleaned to the state's own standards, the agency has made information about such spills harder to get since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Critics say the state is worried less about security than public relations. They fear the dearth of information could jeopardize the health of people who rely on ground water for their drinking water.

"Instead of cleaning up these problems,



A monitoring well, bottom, outside a house on Map Street in Vestal. An MTBE spill in this neighborhood is one of 29 in Broome County.

WAYNE HANSEN / Press & Sun-Bulletin

About MTBE

MTBE, or methyl tertiary butyl ether, has been added to gasoline since the mid-1970s to make fuel burn more efficiently. It became a requirement in the 1990s in some areas to cut down on air pollution. Concern about the downside -- more water pollution -- led New York lawmakers to phase out the chemical beginning next year.

MTBE is not the most toxic ingredient of gasoline, but its ability to spread quickly underground makes it particularly difficult to completely remove once it has spilled. MTBE contamination, coming mostly from

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they've decided to try and withhold the information so the public doesn't know that these problems aren't being cleaned up," said Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting in Ithaca. His firm uses data from the state Department of Environmental Conservation and other sources to compile reports it sells to engineers, water districts, developers and property buyers checking for problems.

leaking underground tanks of gasoline, has been found in every county in New York, according to the state's spills data base.

Most of the MTBE spills reported in New York since 1985 have not been cleaned up to the state's standards. The state says spills should be cleaned so that MTBE does not exceed 10 parts per billion, or one-millionth of a gram per liter.

In Broome County, 169 gasoline spills do not meet clean-up standards. Another 29 are classified as MTBE spills that also fail to meet standards, according to information compiled by Lang's agency current through December.

Richard Demars, a resident of Maple Street in Vestal, lives in a neighborhood contaminated by such a spill.

"They've given me zero information," said Demars, who lives within site of several monitoring wells set up to track pollution spreading underground from a vacant gas station about a quarter-mile away, on the south side of Vestal Parkway.

Two businesses between his house and the vacant gas station were destroyed after fumes triggered an explosion in 1995.

With recent developments, the task of updating and tracking the status of petroleum spills is becoming even more difficult without the DEC's cooperation, Hang said. Since January 2002, the DEC has stopped offering a detailed accounting of the nature of spills and the extent to which they have been resolved, he said.

In particular, they have limited the categories, or data-base "fields," that provide detailed information about specific sites. Omissions include whether the site meets clean-up standards.

The reason, according to Lang: The data show "what an incredibly bad job of enforcing the rules the DEC has done." The numbers confirm that "Binghamton would have had dead gas stations hither and yon," Hang added.

The DEC's Web site with the information, www.dec.state.ny.us/website/der/derfoil/, was out of operation for unexplained reasons as of Friday but would be operational again this week, said DEC spokesman Mike Fraser.

The site shows the date, location, amount and source of the spill, but a crucial piece of information that used to be available is left off: whether the spill has been cleaned up to the state's standards. The agency changed its policy after the Sept. 11 attacks, spokesman Dan Gilbert said.

"The goal was to make it more user-friendly with basic, first-line information, the questions we get most frequently," Gilbert said. "It's in a format that we believe helps the broadest spectrum of people possible."

Gilbert said people can still request and receive all the reports on any particular spill.

The state environmental agency tracks more than 200,000 toxic spills, but MTBE is a particular concern because it is highly soluble and travels fast and far in both soil and water.

A spokesman for MTBE producers said the problem is not with the chemical but with leaky gas

tanks, and many of those were replaced with new and better tanks during a 10-year federal program that began in 1998.

"We have seen a massive and aggressive effort to improve the underground storage of gasoline," said Frank Maisano of the Oxygenated Fuels Association, adding that MTBE worked well to reduce air pollution from cars.

A total of 2,286 MTBE spills have been reported to the state since 1985, and 262 have been cleaned to the state's standards, according to an analysis by Toxics Targeting. Cleanup information on 54 spills isn't available.

That leaves 1,970 spills across the state not fully cleaned up.

In Whalen's neighborhood, filters were installed by the state Department of Environmental Conservation to remove MTBE. After they failed in 2001, Whalen and his family found they had been drinking water with 25 times the amount of MTBE the environmental agency considers safe, though no one fell ill. The environmental agency says MTBE in drinking water should not exceed 10 parts per billion, or one-millionth of a gram per liter.

"We don't ... trust these filters to work all the time," said Whalen, a construction worker.

Hang, the environmental consultant, said MTBE is on a track to become the most widespread pollutant in New York.

"When people say, 'Oh, we don't have a problem,' in all likelihood, they haven't looked hard enough," Hang said.

Staff writer [TOM WILBER](#) contributed to this report.

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