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A Gasoline Additive Lingers in New York's Drinking Water

By IAN URBINA

FORT MONTGOMERY, N.Y., Oct. 26 - Twelve years ago, when a new gasoline additive held the promise of reducing air pollution, New York State made a huge bet that the technology would work. It supported the use of the additive, M.T.B.E., to be mixed with gasoline at some of the highest concentrations in the nation, from 12 to 15 percent, while also allowing the additive to be used in parts of the state where air pollution was less of a problem.

But six years later, when studies began to show that the chemical was a potential carcinogen, state officials realized that by trying to clean the air, they may have seriously damaged the water supply. M.T.B.E. had been leaching into the underground water table from thousands of gas tanks, and now the state has more than 13,000 spills that must be cleaned up, one of the worst cases of drinking-water pollution in the nation, experts say.

As a result, far fewer people have been staying at Annie Scott's bed and breakfast, a two-story Victorian house with a scenic view of the Bear Mountain Bridge on the Hudson here in Orange County. Even though Sunoco installed a purifier in her basement and the company conducts regular testing on her well, Mrs. Scott says the water still smells like turpentine. She refuses to serve it to her guests, drink it herself or give it to her two teenage children.

"We offer bottled water if guests want to brush their teeth, make coffee, or take a drink," said Mrs. Scott, who estimated that she had lost $15,000 worth of business each year since an underground leak in December 1999 at a nearby gas station contaminated local water with M.T.B.E. "We also warn guests about showering, since M.T.B.E. is worse when it vaporizes."

Along with 49 other residents in town whose wells were polluted, Mrs. Scott, 47, filed a lawsuit seeking to force Sunoco, which owned the station, to pay for her loss of income and property value and to help the town build a pipeline to bring water from a nearby reservoir.

Fort Montgomery's situation is like that of towns and cities throughout the state. Last week, a federal court agreed to speed up New York City's $300 million lawsuit against oil refiners for a huge spill in Jamaica, Queens, the lead case in a group of 115 related lawsuits.

"New York is faced with one of the worst M.T.B.E. problems in the country," said Senator Charles Schumer, who has taken up the issue along with other lawmakers in Washington. "And the state is not even done counting the number of spills yet."

While New York and other states have banned gasoline with high levels of M.T.B.E., experts say that New York's troubles are a harbinger of a nationwide problem. Roughly half the country draws its water from underground sources like public and private wells or aquifers.

"People seem to be waiting for some major disaster," said Walter L. T. Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, a firm that provides environmental data to environmental consultants and drinking water suppliers. "But the disaster is already here. It just happens to be occurring underground."

M.T.B.E. contamination has been found in the ground water of at least 28 states, and with estimates ranging from $30 billion to $100 billion for a national cleanup, oil companies have argued that they should not be held accountable since the federal government required the use of oxygenate additives.

Last year, the Bush administration supported a $31 billion national energy bill that would have protected the oil companies from having to pay for the cleanup. Republican supporters of the provision said the companies were not responsible for the decision to use the additive.

"The government mandated the utilization of M.T.B.E.," said Jonathan A. Grella, a spokesman for Representative Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, whose Texas district is home to several of the largest M.T.B.E. makers. "Those who produced it were fulfilling this mandate and therefore they deserve protection." Opposition to the provision was one of the principal reasons the energy bill failed.

In New York, at least 20 municipal water providers, including New York City, have pending lawsuits against oil companies seeking their help in cleaning up M.T.B.E. pollution. More than 150 such lawsuits are pending nationwide, Mr. Hang said.

When tanks leak or trucks spill, gasoline often seeps into the ground, and since most of its ingredients, like benzene, toluene and xylene, are insoluble, the gasoline puddles on top of the water table and evaporates. But M.T.B.E. - methyl tertiary butyl ether - dissolves quickly into water, which is one of the reasons it was popular when, in 1992, the federal government ordered oil companies to add an "oxygenate" to gasoline to make it burn cleaner.

In 1998, having realized the potential damage, New York state officials introduced some of the strictest drinking water standards and cleanup requirements in the country. Experts say that cleanup efforts in the state have been slow, however, because regulators have tended to remove only leaking tanks, often leaving the spilled chemicals to continue leaking through the ground.

Many water officials say the pollution could have been prevented.

"There are reams of documents indicating that oil companies knew the dangers of M.T.B.E., but these companies opted to use M.T.B.E. because it was the cheapest," said Paul J. Granger, the superintendent of the Plainview water system, which serves about 35,000 people on Long Island. Mr. Granger's water district is suing Exxon/Mobil and Shell, whose spills, he said, have polluted his district's ground water with 2,000 times the allowable M.T.B.E. level.

With 3.3 million residents, Long Island has the largest population in the country that depends on a single underground aquifer. Plainview's ground water makes up a section of the larger underground aquifer, but its contamination has not yet spread.

"We just don't have the money to clean up their mess on our own," Mr. Granger said. He added that it would cost $390 million to $1 billion, based on New York State Health Department estimates, to put filters on the 130 wells in Plainview that have been contaminated.

In 1998, the federal government tried to reduce the risk of gasoline leaks by requiring that all faulty underground tanks be upgraded or removed. Older tanks were typically made of a single layer of steel that often corroded and leaked after about 25 years. Newer tanks are double-walled steel.

Mr. Hang said that the biggest part of the problem in New York had been the state's approach to cleanups. Rather than removing all the contamination, regulators often just removed the faulty tank and a limited amount of the surrounding dirt. As a result, there are more than 6,000 sites where the state, having conducted partial cleanups, has administratively closed the file on the site even though pollution in the ground is still seeping toward the ground water.

A spokeswoman for the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, Maureen Wren, did not respond to questions about cleanup methods, but she said that the state was taking ambitious steps to deal with the M.T.B.E. problem. It banned the additive this year, she said, and is providing incentives to municipalities and companies for cleanup.

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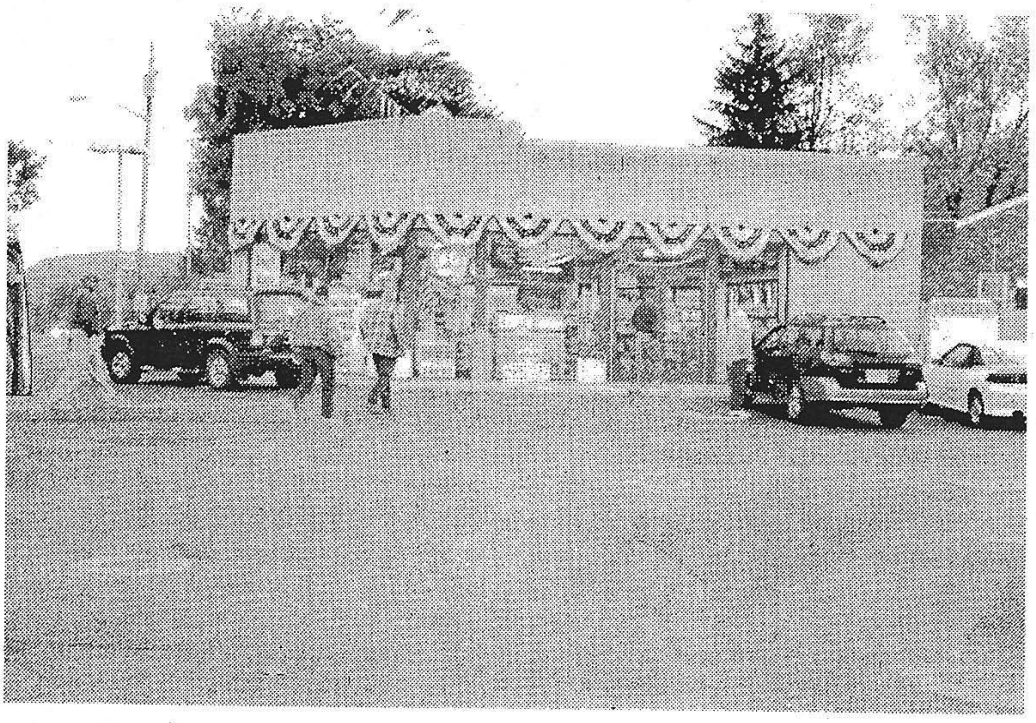
Photographs by Tara Engberg for The New York Times

Robert Scott, his granddaughter, Tierney, and daughter, Annie Scott, with contaminated water.



A gasoline leak at the Sunoco gas station in Fort Montgomery contaminated local water supplies with an additive called M.T.B.E.