New York Daily News - http://www.nydailynews.com

Energy bill stirs outrage

By LAURA WILLIAMS
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
Tuesday, April 26th, 2005

A provision in the federal energy bill passed by the House of Representatives last week could tack $260 onto the average Long Island water bill.

The add-on would pay for the cleanup of a carcinogenic gasoline additive, MTBE, that for decades has been leaking into the ground, posing a growing threat to the island's drinking-water supply.

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) vowed yesterday to filibuster the bill in the Senate - unless the provision, which protects oil companies from having to foot the bill for the cleanup, is removed.

"This is the worst special-interest giveaway to polluters that I've seen in my 30-year political career," Schumer said.

New York's senior senator also released a list of 30 newly discovered spills on or near Long Island water supply wells. Most of these leaks occur from faulty tanks under gas stations.

That brings the number of Long Island gas spills not meeting cleanup standards up to 1,600, said Walter Hang, president of Toxic Targeting, Inc., an environmental watchdog group.

"These gas stations sometimes don't get cleaned up for 20 years," Hang said.

MTBE - methyl tertiary butyl ether - is more dangerous than some other gas additives because it is water-soluble, meaning it blends right into water once it makes contact with it, Hang said. "It migrates really far, really fast. It's like sugar dissolving in coffee," he said.

Oil companies began using MTBE in 1979 to cut air pollution, but in the early 1990s, the chemical was found to quickly leak into ground water. MTBE exposure can lead to headaches and nausea, and has caused cancer and birth defects in laboratory animals.

The gas additive is now illegal in New York state - but there still is a lot of it in the ground. And though the chemical has not been found in Long Island's underground drinking water yet - as it has in thousands of communities nationwide - officials said the local threat is growing.

"We're in immediate danger," said Paul Granger, superintendent of the Plainview Water District. "Oil companies created the danger, and they should fix it."

After MTBE was found in the drinking water in upstate Fort Montgomery, near West Point, locals last year sued two big oil companies. The provision in the new energy bill protects oil companies from such lawsuits.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, whose Texas district includes big oil concerns, pushed for the provision to be part of the energy bill.

"Tom DeLay is helping his Texas oil business friends," Schumer said. "They're saying we can't sue" - and pushing the cost of the cleanup onto taxpayers, he said.