

EDITORIAL

Ethanol Conversion Nears



Efforts to force oil giants to discontinue using methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE) in their gasoline finally have paid off. A surprising announcement came from BP, California's largest gasoline supplier and a top user of ethanol for gasoline.* The plan? To switch by the fourth quarter of 2002 from using MTBE to ethanol, an oxygenate alternative to MTBE. The official deadline for the ban, however, is not set until Jan. 1, 2004, which is a one-year delay by California Governor Gray Davis despite California refiners stating that they would follow through with the original deadline of Dec. 31, 2002.

Since Davis signed the ban three years ago, the ethanol industry has seen the production of an additional one billion gallons to meet demand.

In the 1970s, MTBE was used in the formulation of gasoline to replace lead and comply with the Clean Air Act. It is water-soluble, degrades slowly, spreads quickly and persists indefinitely in groundwater. For example, a car accident could contaminate an entire underground aquifer. Currently, there is no national maximum contaminant level (MCL) for this EPA-listed possible carcinogen. However, some states set their own such as California's primary MCL of 0.013 mg/L.

Most of the MTBE hype was caused in California when cities such as Santa Monica and South Lake Tahoe found high levels of MTBE in their drinking water. Due to the debate regarding clean-up costs for such contamination, California has been the first state to take drastic action in its prevention. In California alone, there are a reported 1,189 underground tank sites leaking MTBE within 1,000 feet of public supply wells or aquifers as well as 1,729 leaking tank sites further away. "I commend BP for making this courageous decision," said Bob Dinneen, president of the Renewable Fuels Association. "There is simply no reason for any California oil company to risk further drinking water supplies by continuing to use MTBE."

In April, a landmark Superior Court case found that gasoline containing MTBE is a "defective product" and three major oil companies—Shell Oil Co., Lyondell Chemical Co. and Tosco Corp.—were found guilty of acting with malice when they placed the defective product on the market. (The oil industry holds that it followed laws that deemed MTBE an appropriate product.) Billions of dollars in punitive damages are predicted from similar suits filed by cities, well owners and consumers.

With MTBE in the limelight for many consumers, it is up to our industry to teach them to test their water and use those results to select the best technology for removal such as air stripping or granular activated carbon, which are recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

I use California as an example of MTBE efforts. However, there are other states that also are addressing this problem. Visit www.epa.gov and www.usgs.gov websites to learn about the various areas that are facing this contamination. Other websites for information include www.ethanolrfa.org, www.mtbecontamination.com and srtp.ucdavis.edu/mtbe/page_4.htm. Perhaps in the future we will see further research, an MCL, more treatment technologies and bans on MTBE. Until then, dealers should be ready and able to help customers with their concerns.

Best Wishes,

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* BP brands ARCO gasoline on the West Coast.

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