

MTBE POSES NO HUMAN HEALTH RISK, EC REPORT CONCLUDES

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Oct 02, 2002 (HART'S EUROPEAN FUELS NEWS/PBI Media via COMTEX) -- There is a need to reduce the risk of human exposure to MTBE, but the petrol additive is not toxic and poses no risk to human health, according to a finalized MTBE risk assessment report by the European Commission Joint Research Center that confirms earlier draft findings.

However, when gasoline containing the octane-boosting additive is leaked, it contaminates groundwater, making drinking water taste and smell bad, even at minute levels, the report said.

But taste and odor concerns alone didn't lead the researchers to recommend banning use of the substance in petrol. And while they fell short of recommending a specific solution, they did note that "[t]he major source of groundwater contamination appears to be releases from underground gasoline storage systems," and that "there is a growing risk for groundwater pollution unless appropriate actions to prevent leakages and spills are taken."

There are no European Union-wide regulations for monitoring and controlling leaks from gasoline storage tanks. Instead, such regulations are left to individual member states. But an EC recommendation dating back to November 2001 recommends that "monitoring programs be undertaken, where appropriate, in order to permit the early detection of groundwater contaminated by MTBE."

The EC recommends that "best available" techniques be applied to construction and operation of underground storage tanks and that the European Committee for Standardization develop harmonized technical standards for tank operation.

The European approach to groundwater contamination is in stark contrast to the prevailing U.S. approach of banning the controversial additive. To date, more than a dozen U.S. states have moved to ban MTBE, and the federal government is considering a plan to implement a nation-wide MTBE ban.

The ban is primarily being pushed by environmentalists, the ethanol lobby (which is seeking to replace MTBE with ethanol) and lawmakers friendly to either cause. It's being fought tooth-and-nail by refiners and MTBE producers, with the latter standing to face significant financial difficulties if their product is forced off the market. The fate of MTBE in the U.S. is expected to be clearly defined by year's end.

The European approach is also interesting considering that Europe is often considered more environmentally aggressive than the U.S., noted Frank Maisano, spokesman for the Oxygenated Fuels Association, a lobbying group that represents the U.S. MTBE industry.

"Pragmatism and sound science are the cornerstones of European outlook," explained Bruno Hery, head of the European Fuel Oxygenates Association, at an MTBE conference last year.

"There is almost unequivocal support in Europe...to say that the issue is with storage tanks" and not MTBE solely, Hery said.

Maisano said the cornerstone of the U.S. outlook, at least on this issue, is politics --garnering support from the ethanol (agricultural) community in an election year. "MTBE is not a health risk," Maisano said. "There are those in the ethanol community who continue to say MTBE is a hazard. They're just plain wrong."

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