

Placer County Water Agency

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POSITION PAPER
REGARDING Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether (MTBE)
and SUPPORT FOR SB-521 [MOUNTJOY]

BY
PLACER COUNTY WATER AGENCY
AUBURN, CALIFORNIA

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Compromising water quality in the name of air quality is an unacceptable paradox to officials of the Placer County Water Agency.

The Board of Directors of the Water Agency, striving to keep the water resources serving Placer County, California, untainted from pollutant chemicals - including the State's Clean Burning Gasoline Program utilizing MTBE - support the provisions of SB 521 by Senator Richard Mountjoy.

The Water Agency welcomes efforts to reduce the infusion of chemicals and other contaminants in the rivers, lakes and aquifers supplying drinking water to Placer County's numerous communities, six cities, farms, businesses and industries. Legislation, such as SB 521, that strives to avoid the further spread of chemicals like MTBE in water supplies and that strives to avoid water rate payers from having to pay for MTBE testing and remediation in drinking water is commendable from the perspective of the Water Agency.

The numerous water resources serving Placer County are known to be impressively pristine. The Water Agency wants to keep them that way. Our most notable drinking water supplies include:

- Lake Tahoe and the Truckee River,
- Folsom Lake and the American River,
- Lake Spaulding and the Yuba River,
- Rollins Lake and the Bear River,
- French Meadows and Hell Hole Reservoirs on the Upper Middle Fork American River, plus
- Innumerable wells drawing from various groundwater supplies.

These resources serve 215,000 people plus a large employment base of business, industry and agriculture across Placer County's expansive 1,500 square miles.

Yet, our drinking water sources are threatened by the unmitigated use of MTBE under the State's Clean Burning Gasoline Program as an additive to meet carbon monoxide, air quality, emission standards.

Placer County's water supplies are vulnerable to MTBE and other chemicals in a wide variety of ways. Most notably is the innumerable miles of the county traversed by a network of systems that transport fuel products. Including:

- Truck traffic along Interstate 80 and many State highways;
- Rail traffic along several rail lines; plus
- High pressure petroleum pipe line owned by Santa Fe Pacific Pipeline Partners, L.P., that alternately carries dozens

of different petroleum products including gasoline on a route that follows the rail road right-of-way from Roseville, through the Rocklin fuel tank yards to points eastward over the Donner summit into the State of Nevada.

Trucks, rail cars and pipelines transport fuels of all types across Placer County including gasoline. These transportation systems of fuel are subject to accidents, derailments and pipe line blow-outs.

Placer County's water resources are further subject to MTBE contamination as associated with fuel storage leaks, refueling spills and accidents, storm water runoff plus water craft exhaust vented into lakes and rivers.

State and Federal health risk levels for MTBE are set very low: 35 ~~mg/L~~ and 70 ~~mg/L~~, respectively. MTBE has a turpentine-like taste and odor in water and can be detected by the public at very low concentration levels of between 15 to 40 ~~mg/L~~.

The presence of MTBE in drinking water sources may immeasurably harm customer confidence in treated water supplies. MTBE monitoring data from the California Department of Health Services (DHS) reveals that it is present with increasing regularity in surface and groundwater sources in various parts of California.

It is hoped that Placer County's water sources will be spared MTBE pollution. Water Agency officials hope to keep it that way and are fully engaged in the MTBE debate relevant to water quality.

In fact, the Water Agency's position to question the propriety of MTBE in water supplies and to support SB 521 has attracted an inordinate amount of attention from people supporting retention of MTBE in gasoline.

Water Agency officials have been told that for the "good" of the State's Clean Burning Gasoline Program that the retention of MTBE is essential. Also, that MTBE is "here to stay" and that although residual consequences to water supplies is unfortunate it may not be possible to over come all contamination to drinking water supplies.

It appears that water quality is expected to yield to air quality's MTBE gasoline additive. This presents unsettling questions and concerns to the Water Agency.

Among them include: Why were public health standards for ingesting MTBE-tainted water not set years ago when MTBE was first approved? Why have State Safe Drinking Water requirements never been set for MTBE? Who can water suppliers turn to for financial payment of costs to perform sampling, testing and remediation of MTBE-tainted surface and groundwater sources and drinking water supplies?

If water suppliers and consumers are expected to "live with" MTBE, and if consumers are to avoid ingesting MTBE through their drinking water, then the Water Agency appeals directly to the State Legislature on behalf of all water suppliers to assure that every penny of expense associated with MTBE in water - from water sampling and testing costs through to ultimate MTBE contaminant removal and disposal - NOT be borne by any water supplier or water rate payer. All such costs should be fully funded and paid for by those favoring retention of MTBE in gasoline.

There are tremendous costs associated with detecting MTBE in water. Also, the removal of MTBE from the public's drinking water supply is extremely difficult and very expensive.

The task to run tests, for example, of water samples in order to detect the presence of MTBE in water is, by itself, an outrageous expense.

To illustrate: On May 19, 1997, the Association of California Water Agencies sent a memo marked "important time critical notice" to every water supplier in California using surface water and river intakes. ACWA asked that these water suppliers immediately take water supply samples and test for MTBE before and after the Memorial Day weekend and throughout the summer. We at the Water Agency had hoped to participate. Yet, we found that the cost to test for the presence of MTBE from various key locations in our water zone delivery system would run us nearly \$60,000; of which \$54,600 would be for laboratory testing alone. This is cost prohibitive and we can't afford to participate.

Besides, why should water rate payers in western Placer County, have to pay to test the water for MTBE? It ought to be the obligation of those supporting the State's Clean Burning Gasoline Program.

Further, those who favor MTBE in gasoline should be compelled to pay not only all costs to sample and test for MTBE but also for the treatment and removal of it from drinking water.

Also, MTBE testing and remediation should not become yet another of the all to numerous "unfunded" mandates imposed upon water suppliers and water rate payers.

Water Agency officials recently turned to DHS for information on MTBE in surface and groundwater supplies, guidance on its "removal" process and funding sources to remediate MTBE from drinking water.

We learned that there are already several surface and groundwater supplies that are MTBE-tainted (as set forth in a monthly report issued by DHS and available via the Internet). Also, it turns out that DHS officials are as perplexed as we are as to how to remove MTBE in drinking water.

We have also learned that it is no small technological task to remove MTBE in the continuous and ever flowing quantities of water needed when producing massive amounts of drinking water on a "real time" basis at large water treatment plants and well head sites.

None the less, if MTBE's are going to be allowed to continue to be used in gasoline and escape to water supplies (as DHS data reveals), then it may be only a matter of time before water sources available to Placer County become tainted by MTBE as well.

If this is the case, then: Who does the Water Agency and other water suppliers in Placer County turn to right now to have MTBE related costs fully underwritten and paid for in advance? Who do we turn to now to pay for water plant or well head site construction costs to install costly processes for the eventual safe removal and disposal of MTBE-tainted water?

So far, when directly asked by Water Agency officials, the people who favor MTBE's retention have declined to respond to these and similar important fiscal accountability issues affecting water quality.

We find, quite frankly, that both the health risks and the costs associated to test for or to remediate MTBE in water supplies are not being squarely met by those favoring MTBE's retention. If water suppliers and consumers are compelled to "live with" MTBE as it migrates into water supplies then it is time to place full fiscal responsibility and health risk accountability directly upon MTBE supporters.

Further, it would be a wise move to stop the use and resultant infusion of further MTBE into water supplies until all health risks, contamination removal techniques and costs are known and assurances guaranteed by those favoring MTBE's retention.

Also, the Water Agency urges the use of sound, independent scientific research to re-evaluate and assess all risks and consequences of MTBE including the ingesting of it from water. Finally, the unknowns of MTBE in the public's water supplies are far too risky to allow MTBE to continue unmitigated.

The best alternative offered to date on the MTBE issue is SB 521. It is a measure reviewed by the Water Agency Board of Directors who find that it strives to overcome the paradox of compromising water quality in the name of air quality.

Thus, SB 521 gained the support of the Board of Directors of the Placer County Water Agency who likewise recommend your favorable consideration of it as well.

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