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**POLLUTION**

## **32 Gas Stations in Report Show Spillage Signs**

By **MATT MABE**

THE water that fills the drinking glasses and bathtubs of Long Islanders comes from right beneath their feet. Thousands of public and private water wells wick groundwater from aquifers, the sole source of drinking water for 2.7 million people.

But a new study shows that they could be getting more than just water.

A four-year federally financed survey of 52 gas stations across Long Island found 32 of them to have previously unidentified petroleum spills that could threaten the Island's aquifers.

The report, prepared by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and released in February, showed the presence of methyl tertiary butyl ether, or M.T.B.E., a toxic fuel additive that is saturating the soil beneath the stations. M.T.B.E., which some federal studies have linked to cancer, was banned by New York in 2004.

To some environmental experts and community activists, the high percentage of contaminated sites raises questions about the full extent of the pollution, its threat to public health and how it will be cleaned up.

"Right now we really only have a snapshot," said Kevin Hale, a project manager at the Energy Research and Development Authority and one of two researchers who prepared the final report. "We think it's extensive and expensive. That's all we can say."

When gas stations' underground fuel tanks leak, they form plumes — bulbous pockets of petroleum that are soaked up by the soil the way a teabag soaks up water. The plumes expand deeper with time and threaten to penetrate the 85-foot-deep aquifers.

Statewide studies from 1978 to 1998 by the State Department of Environmental Conservation found 5,262 spills, the report said. The disproportionate number of reported fuel leaks on Long Island — 24 percent of the state total — prompted the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to finance the most recent study in 2002.

Mr. Hale said that because of the high number of identified spills in this study, the E.P.A. had pledged more money for an expanded survey of the 1,100 gas stations on Long Island that

remained untested.

State and local officials say the contamination poses no health threat to the public, however.

“We have complete confidence in the quality of our public water supplies,” Richard F. Daines, the state health commissioner, said in a statement that accompanied the study.

Kenneth S. Claus, chairman of the Long Island Water Conference, a coalition of government and private water suppliers, said the conference regularly and meticulously samples drinking water from supply wells. As an added precaution, he said, the county health departments conduct random tests, too.

“If people knew how rigorously we test our water, they would never buy bottled water again,” Mr. Claus said.

Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, a company that generates reports on contamination sites, said that well water might be uncontaminated now but that untreated M.T.B.E. plumes would continue to grow.

“It’s like smelling smoke,” Mr. Hang said. “You’ve got to do everything you can to put out the fire as quickly as possible.”

The Department of Environmental Conservation said it could not test every gas station. Before the E.P.A. grant, it became involved only when local authorities or gas station proprietors indicated contamination.

“We are more or less a reactive organization rather than a proactive organization,” Mr. Hale said.

Nevertheless, Mr. Hang said that the 62 percent contamination rate was alarming.

The Department of Environmental Conservation failed to take action “for so many years that the source has become enormous,” said Mr. Hang, who added that the cleanup, which might cost billions, could have been prevented had the law been enforced to hold polluters responsible.

Some residents are worried, too. Carol Meshkow, president of Concerned Citizens of the Plainview-Old Bethpage Community, said that every Long Islander is affected by the threat of contamination. M.T.B.E. contamination has been found near some Plainview Water District pumps.

“We just don’t know where the next contaminated area is going to pop up,” she said. “It’s sinful in this day and age that we can’t get out there and protect our future water supply.”