

All's not well with the water

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Sen. Charles Schumer chose Elizabeth DelBuono's yard in Smithtown to dramatize his campaign to hold oil companies accountable for the cleanup costs of fuel spills that contaminated groundwater with the gasoline additive MTBE.

For two years, DelBuono's family drank, showered and watered their lawn with water from a private well in her front yard - a well that in 1998 turned out to have 26 times the state's acceptable level at that time of MTBE for public drinking water. DelBuono got the water tested on a hunch after reading an article about MTBE contamination. Had she not, she might never have learned about the plume that migrated from underneath a nearby gas station to contaminate groundwater in her neighborhood, according to a state Department of Environmental Conservation investigation triggered by her discovery.

Unlike public drinking water supplies, private wells are not routinely tested for MTBE and other contaminants, a loophole that Schumer said yesterday could leave thousands of Long Island residents who use private wells clueless about what is in their water. There are an estimated 60,000 private wells in Suffolk County that supply about 200,000 residents, according to the Suffolk Department of Health.

"We don't even know how many of them might be contaminated," Schumer said at a news conference where he urged the EPA to survey private wells to assess the extent of the MTBE problem.

A potential human carcinogen whose health effects are not fully known, MTBE was added to gas to make it burn more efficiently. It was outlawed in New York State in 2004 after the additive, which travels swiftly through groundwater, was found to have fouled drinking water across the country.

The EPA issued a series of recommendations in 1999 on how to deal with the problem, but has not

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taken a conclusive position on the chemical's health effects. In a statement yesterday, the agency said, "The EPA does not regulate private wells anywhere in the country" and noted it is currently evaluating whether to regulate MTBE or issue a health advisory.

Schumer and the DelBuonos share a common interest - making sure that oil companies repay individuals and public utilities for the cost of the cleanup. The DelBuonos, along with many of their neighbors, have filed a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil Corp. regarding the MTBE plume.

And Schumer, as he has in years past, is working to block the insertion of a provision into the Federal Energy Bill that would shield MTBE manufacturers from liability lawsuits.

"The sword hanging over the oil companies' heads is the threat of being sued," Schumer said. Exxon Mobil Corp. spokeswoman Paula Chen declined to comment on the lawsuit, which was filed in 2004, but noted that the company has been working with the DEC to clean up the Smithtown spill. "We take any sort of these situations very seriously," Chen said.

Hazard in the water

Two gas stations in Smithtown have been blamed for contaminating groundwater with MTBE, a chemical added to gasoline sold on Long Island from 1979 to 2003. States guidelines since 1999 say that drinking water should not contain more than 10 parts per billion of MTBE.

Islandwide

Public supply wells contaminated with MTBE.

Nassau

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Suffolk

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SOURCE: SEN. CHARLES SCHUMER'S OFFICE; TOXICS TARGETING INC.; STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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