

# County of Santa Clara

## Department of Environmental Health

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MTBE banned at last

Santa Clara Valley Water District played key role to remove water-damaging gasoline additive

(Revised 6/1/05)

Tireless lobbying the past several years by the Santa Clara Valley Water District (SCVWD) to protect local drinking water basins from a gasoline additive paid off on New Year's Eve with the official ban of the chemical, known as MTBE.

MTBE leaked into more than 10,000 throughout California, contaminating scores of drinking water wells in the state.. Now, gasoline can no longer be sold with the additive and oil companies are importing ethanol - derived from corn -- to make MTBE-free gas blends.

But SCVWD and the County of Santa Clara (CSC) Department of Environmental Health (DEH) aren't reducing their groundwater-monitoring efforts because operating gas tanks always have the potential for failure, and decades of MTBE contamination - some of it yet undetected - must be cleaned.

Still, the ban is a huge victory for the SCVWD and for Santa Clara County.

The SCVWD has been at the heart of the MTBE fight since the mid 1990s. Immediately after discovery of the chemical's water-polluting ability, the SCVWD board of directors, under the lead of then-Director Bob Gross, assembled a team of in-house experts to oversee monitoring for MTBE at leaking underground fuel tank sites throughout the county. At the same time, the SCVWD initiated a concerted effort to educate local, state and federal officials about MTBE's risk to Silicon Valley's drinking water.

It also began to extensively monitor the county's reservoirs, often sampling the waters weekly in the summer, and working closely with the CSC Parks and Recreation Department and local boaters to limit gasoline-powered watercraft use to control MTBE concentrations.

"The SCVWD's experience over the past two decades dealing with a variety of contaminants in groundwater and in above-ground supplies has proven time and again that the best strategy is to control the pollutant at its source whenever possible," said Chief Operating Officer Walt Wadlow.

On the legislative front, the SCVWD worked with the cities of Santa Monica and South Lake Tahoe, and water agencies across the state, to lobby Sacramento and Washington, D. C., for a ban on MTBE.

Finally in 1999, then-California Gov. Gray Davis ordered a ban on the gasoline additive phased out by 2003. Oil industry claims that the deadline was not feasible because of logistical problems delayed the ban for one year. Despite the ban, the SCVWD and CSC DEH will continue to keep a sharp eye on groundwater as part of an ongoing basin-wide monitoring effort while making sure past MTBE leaks into groundwater are properly investigated and cleaned up before it can damage the local water supply.

**Board of Supervisors: Donald F. Gage, Blanca Alvarado, Pet McHugh, James T. Beale, Jr., Liz Kniss**  
**County Executive: Peter Kutras, Jr.**