

Long history of select Lake Tahoe Basin gas stations contaminating soil, groundwater

By Lauri Kemper

The Lahontan Water Board is considering closing a groundwater pollution cleanup case at the USA gas station in South Lake Tahoe after years of cleanup work following fuel spills and leaks at the site. The site is now considered a low threat to the environment and drinking water supplies.

The USA gas station is one of five Lake Tahoe Basin gas stations named in a recent lawsuit filed by the attorney general on behalf of the State Water Resources Control Board. In the past, the five sites all caused significant groundwater contamination and threatened or shut down community water supplies.

The lawsuit filed in May, alleges that Azad Amiri, Sarbjit S. Kang, and their affiliates committed numerous leak prevention violations at 10 underground storage tank facilities in Contra Costa, El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento and Yolo counties. The facilities are fueling and convenience stores that operate under several brand names. The lawsuit addresses current and ongoing violations at the sites.

Lahontan Water Board staff efforts have resulted in the restoration of water quality and protection of drinking water at the five locations in the Tahoe basin that are named in the lawsuit.

Below is a summary of the Lahontan Board's regulatory activities at those five stations:

Former USA Gas Station No. 7, 1140 Emerald Bay Road, South Lake Tahoe

In 1983, fuel was observed leaking from an underground storage tank following excavation work at the site. The tanks and some contaminated soil were removed and new tanks installed. From 1986 through 1993, some groundwater monitoring was conducted, but the responsible party failed to meet Water Board orders.

By 1996, Water Board staff determined an additional release of petroleum occurred at the site based on high concentrations of MTBE in groundwater. In 1997, the Water Board issued its third cleanup and abatement order to the owners.

From 1997-2013 significant cleanup efforts were conducted. At its maximum, the contaminated groundwater plume extended approximately 2,000 feet north, west, and northwest of the source area, and affected or threatened private and community drinking water supply wells in the area. Currently, the residual petroleum plume is about 150 feet long, and MTBE has been removed except for a small area surrounding one monitoring well.

The responsible party has requested case closure under the State Water Board's Low-threat Underground Storage Tank Case Closure Policy. Water Board initiated a 60-day comment period. In response to comments by the South Tahoe Public Utility District, the Water Board has requested additional information from the responsible party to support case closure.

Former Beacon Station, 8070 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach

In 1998, North Tahoe Public Utility District staff notified the Water Board of gasoline sheen on Lake Tahoe, near its drinking water intake pipeline. Gasoline discovered in monitoring wells between the lake and gas station confirmed leaks in the underground storage tanks.

With the station within 100 feet of the lake, the North Tahoe

PUD ceased pumping lake water at Secline Avenue for municipal water supply. Over the next 10 years, the Tesoro Company, which owned the gas station operated by Kang and Amiri, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to clean up soil and groundwater pollution (funds reimbursed by the State Underground Storage Tank Cleanup Fund). When cleanup was completed in 2010, the Water Board closed the case. The North Tahoe PUD resumed pumping the Secline Avenue intake pipeline for municipal water supply.

The site now operates as a Mobil Gas Station.

Former Beacon Station, 3208 Highway 50, Meyers

In 1997, South Tahoe Public Utility District shared with the Water Board sampling results of MTBE (a fuel additive) in two municipal supply wells in Meyers. The Lahontan Water Board issued orders to five businesses in Meyers requiring all to conduct groundwater sampling. The results showed extensive contamination at the Beacon station at the west end of Meyers. Further investigations showed gasoline had moved through the porous granitic soils from leaking pipelines, dispenser pumps, and tank sumps at the gas station.

The station was owned by Tveten Corporation and operated by Sarbjit Singh Kang.

STPUD ceased operating the affected municipal supply wells along with a third supply well located farther away. The loss of these wells created a burden on STPUD to provide enough drinking water to its customers.

Upon the death of the property owner, the Water Board took on cleanup of the site using special State funds earmarked for emergency, abandoned, and recalcitrant sites. A contractor hired by the Water Board spent the next six years investigating the extent of groundwater contamination and conducting cleanup actions. When the drinking water aquifer had been restored in 2005, the Water Board closed the case.

Slightly more than \$1 million was spent to investigate and cleanup the contamination. The Water Board issued a fine in 1999 to Kang, the estate of Joe Tveten, and the J.E. Tveten Corporation in the amount of \$112,500, which was never paid.

Swiss Mart Gas Station, 913 Emerald Bay Road, South Lake Tahoe

State mandated tank upgrades resulted in the identification of soil and groundwater contamination at the Swiss Mart gas station in 1998 from leaking tanks, pipelines and dispensers. The business was owned by the Amiri Oil Company and operated by Sarbjit Singh Kang.

Gasoline and diesel impacted one of the Lukins Brothers Water Company's municipal supply wells located one block away and two private domestic wells two blocks away. The municipal well was taken out of service. Under Water Board orders, some groundwater cleanup, with off and on operations of the system occurred over 10 years. Failure to comply with cleanup and abatement orders resulted in the Water Board levying fines in 1999 and 2009, of which \$256,000 are still unpaid.

The Water Board also pursued injunctive relief in El Dorado County Superior Court to require Kang and Amiri to keep operating the remediation system in order to protect nearby water supply wells. The site was cleaned up in 2010 and the case was closed.

Former Beacon 3688, 2304 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe

In 1988, a site assessment by Beacon indicated petroleum vapors in the subsurface. The Water Board required groundwater investigation and by 1991, soil and ground water cleanup began. In 1992, the underground storage tanks were replaced and approximately 1,500 cubic yards of contaminated soil was removed.

In 1998, a leaking gas dispenser was observed, and monitoring showed MTBE in groundwater at previously clean locations. In

response to these detections, South Tahoe Public Utility District preemptively shut down their Helen supply wells.

Because of this new release Beacon increased the pumping rate of their groundwater treatment system. By 2002, more than 22 million gallons of contaminated groundwater was pumped and treated at the site. The site was closed in 2004 with groundwater contaminant levels at or near laboratory detection limits.

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board's mission is to preserve, protect, enhance and restore the quality of California's water resources for the benefit of present and future generations. For more info about contaminated sites, go online. Here is a link to the gas station maps.

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