

Tahoe Tom's at center of MTBE issue – again

By Kathryn Reed

Years after MTBE was used in South Lake Tahoe it continues to turn up in well water.

The latest incident involves Tahoe Tom's gas station near the state line. The former owners – Mohammad Ahmad and the Thomas E. Erickson Trust – have never fully cleaned up the contaminated groundwater even though multiple complaints have been filed against them dating to 1991.

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board said samples taken from a well used by the Mark Twain Hotel on Park Avenue “revealed the presence of the contaminant MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether) at concentrations above the drinking water standard for taste and odor.”

Lahontan officials were not available for comment.

Cindy Black, manager of the hotel, told *Lake Tahoe News* their water is fine to drink or to shower with. She said the water is tested all the time.

“In the summertime there is more usage so the water level goes down so it looks like (MTBE) is higher,” Black said.

Several properties on the California side near the state line have individual wells. Others use Lakeside Park Association water. That water comes directly from Lake Tahoe.

MTBE is a volatile organic chemical that was added to gasoline starting in the 1980s. In the 1990s it was found to be contaminating groundwater. It has since been banned – from California in 2004 and Nevada in 2007.

It was such a problem locally that 13 of South Tahoe Public Utility District's wells were put out of service because of the contamination. The district sued the oil companies, winning a \$69 million judgment in 2002.

"MTBE in aquifers has reduced over time, however the drought appears to be increasing groundwater concentrations of residual petroleum left in soil," Lahontan said in a press release.

Lahontan, again, is going after the former owners. In 2009, those parties were ordered to pay a civil penalty of \$412,900. They never did.

It is not known why Lahontan thinks any enforcement action now will make any difference or get a different result from the prior owners.

"The current owner has gone out of his way to help try to clean that up even though it is not his responsibility," Mehrdad Javaherian, consultant for the owner Lake Tahoe Investments, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Historically the other operators released gasoline. That gasoline had MTBE. That is in the ground. The rate of migration of that gasoline depends on the direction and hydrologic gradient of the water. That can be impacted by drought."

Lahontan has added Lake Tahoe Investments as a responsible party to the cleanup.