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A Review of the Policy for the Elimination of MtBE as a Petroleum Additive in the U.S.

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Abstract

MtBE is used as a gasoline additive all over the United States; its use is associated with the reduction of atmospheric concentrations of carbon monoxide or ozone. MtBE has been used to great advantage since the seventies without society being aware of any adverse health effects, other than bad odor. Thus, when the U.S. Geological Survey reported in 1994 that MtBE was the most frequently found volatile organic chemicals (VOC) in shallow ground water from urban areas, concerns about potential inhalation health effects and water contamination were quickly raised. Yet, despite a multitude of studies, there remains considerable debate over what, if any, health effects result from exposure to MtBE. Faced with a growing outcry on the part of the public about whether MtBE might be adverse to human health and the environment, the EPA appointed a Blue Ribbon panel in November 1998 to investigate the air and water quality concerns. The panel sought to explain any links between MtBE exposures and negative human health conditions, and the degree to which a cause-

effect relationship might exist. This master's paper reviews the steps associated with the policy development for MtBE including impact on air and water quality and public health. It summarizes available data on benefits and risks to support the need for a policy decision at the national level. It concludes by advocating for legislation which truly controls the use of MtBE. This may serve as a model for what to do or what not to do for other public health/environmental policy.

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