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Water contamination pine barrens neighborhood prompts county health department state investigations ^[1]

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Extremely high levels of a toxic gasoline additive were found in the well water of one Manorville home last week, prompting a state investigation to find where the contaminant came from and if it is affecting other homes in the neighborhood that also depend on private wells.

The Oakwood Drive home is located in the core preservation area of the Pine Barrens, a largely preserved forest valued for its role in protecting the region's drinking water aquifer. Water samples taken at the home contained levels of the contaminant MTBE that were more than 1000-percent higher than the state drinking water standard, according to a Suffolk County Department of Health Services letter sent to homeowner Clare Bennett.

MTBE, which stands for Methyl-Tertiary-Butyl-Ether, is a gasoline additive that was banned in New York State in 2004. Use of MTBE has declined in the United States in recent years because when spilled, it is more difficult and time-consuming to treat than other gasoline compounds, according to the EPA.

High levels of MTBE in air can cause a number of symptoms, including irritation of the eyes and respiratory tract, headaches, lightheadedness, stupor, dizziness, nausea and confusion, according to the health department letter. Though MTBE has caused cancer in laboratory animals, it is not known whether it can cause cancer in humans.

The contaminant was discovered through a water test Suffolk County offers for a fee to residents with private wells. Bennett said, as a homeowner with a private well, she requests the test every few years to make sure her drinking water meets state standards.

This year, the routine test came back with disturbing results: samples of Bennett's drinking water contained an MTBE level of 110 parts per billion. The New York State drinking water standard is just 10 parts per billion.

"They don't know yet how it got here," Bennett said today. "There are no gas stations near me. We're literally in the core of the Pine Barrens – which is sort of creepy that we've got this

showing up here.”

Bennett’s home is located just southwest of the former Naval Weapons Reserve Plant in Calverton, which was operated by Grumman Aerospace/Northrop Grumman for 40 years. The company built and flight tested naval aircraft at the site. In 1999, it was turned over to the Town of Riverhead, which is today redeveloping it as a business and industrial park. But some areas of the 2,900-acre site were polluted from the industrial manufacturing activities and groundwater was contaminated on site. A decade later, a deep plume of contaminants — industrial solvents and other chemicals used in the manufacturing of fighter jets by Grumman — was discovered to have migrated off the site.

County and state officials do not know if the former Grumman site is the source of the MTBE contamination at Bennett’s home, according to a spokesperson from the state Department of Environmental Conservation. MTBE was not among the chemical pollutants found on the site, according to remediation documents prepared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “There are no obvious sources of the contamination,” the DEC said in a statement this afternoon. “The resident is south of Grumman. However, regional groundwater flow is southeast. In conjunction with County sampling of other homes, DEC will conduct an investigation to identify the source and extent of contamination.

The county health department warned Bennett not to drink or cook with the water from her private well, not to take soaking baths and to take quick showers instead. The DEC delivered cases of bottled water to Bennett’s home this afternoon for her to use for cooking and drinking. Bennett said she immediately alerted her neighbors, who also depend on private wells for their drinking water. The nearest public water hook-up is several miles away, Bennett explained, so private wells are their only option.

Many of her neighbors have young children, including a family across the street who had a baby in September. “Newborns take a lot of baths, so I wanted to make sure they know,” Bennett said.

It is very unlikely a public water main will ever be provided because of the distance to an existing main, the cost of bringing public water to the area and the few numbers of potential users, Bennett said.

Bennett said she was told by the health department it is possible to filter the MTBE out of the water, with a very large charcoal filter — “I’m told it’s the size of a torpedo,” she said. Meanwhile, the county health department and the state DEC are investigating where the contaminant came from and if it has affected any other private wells in the area or any public drinking water sources in the Pine Barrens, according to county health department spokesperson Grace Kelly-McGovern.

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