

Oil companies sued over water pollution

Accusations of toxic leaks

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San Francisco—An environmental organization sued 14 oil companies for billions of dollars Tuesday, accusing them of polluting sources of California's drinking water with toxic leaks from refineries, pipelines and storage tanks.

Communities for a Better Environment also contends that state water boards stood idly by as groundwater was contaminated by benzene and toluene from 3,500 sites, some in every county of the state. The Superior Court suit targets only the oil companies and does not name state officials or the gas stations where most of the storage tanks are located.

“Water boards and the attorney general have known about this contamination for a decade now and have done virtually nothing to clean it up,” said Richard Drury, legal direction of CBE.

“This case will send a strong message to all polluters in the only language that they understand,” said Denny Larson, the group's Northern California direction. “If you pollute our groundwater, you will have to clean it up.”

Benzene and toluene are both known to cause cancer. A separate CBE suit, filed in Superior Court last year, accuses eight oil companies of contaminating ground water with the gasoline additive MTBE, a possible carcinogen.

Tuesday's suit accuses the companies of violating Proposition 65, California's 1986 initiative that prohibited discharging substances that cause cancer or birth defects into drinking water.

The suit seeks penalties of \$2,500 per day for discharge of each substance over a four-year period, and damages equal to the amounts oil companies saved by allegedly failing to fix or prevent leaks. Drury said the damages would be in the billions of dollars.

“All of our companies are in full compliance with those upgrade requirements,” he said. “This should go a long way towards protecting ground water sources.”

Unocal spokesman Barry Lane said the company, which sold its refineries and service stations to Tosco in March 1997, has dealt promptly with every known instance of pollution.