

Time bombs

Hearing concern for protecting pure water supplies being expressed freely by nearly every responsible person (whether politically active, environmentally involved, or simply public citizens) must be an enormous relief to the small groups of people who, until fairly recently, the majority liked to call "Doomsayers." Their voices, which began to be heard in whispers fifteen years or more ago, swelled first to a chorus and then to shouts as the truth about water pollution percolated through layer after layer of our populace.

Yet even as we support new ordinances to minimize future pollution of water supplies, old (and, unfortunately, too often forgotten) gasoline and fuel oil storage tanks lie buried in the ground. Slowly rusting, perhaps already leaking hydrocarbons into the sandy soil, the tanks have been consigned to oblivion. Whatever remained in them, however, will eventually be in our water supplies.

To appreciate what that might mean to families living where high concentrations of hydrocarbons have been found in local water supplies, listen to some people who experienced it.

"The smell is atrocious. It is like sticking your head in a gas tank every time you wash your face."

"You've heard about borrowing a cup of sugar from neighbors? Well, around here, we borrow cups of bottled water."

"We will move as soon as we can save enough money to buy a house."

"Drink it? We don't even cook vegetables in it. We hate washing with it because after a shower sometimes you smell worse than before. After washing clothes, we air them even after drying them in the dryer. I tell the kids not to drink the water, but whenever they get sick, I wonder if they have a virus or drank some water."

"Every week day my husband brings home whatever is left

in the water cooler at his office. Even so, it costs us at least a couple of dollars a day to keep enough drinking and cooking water available."

Another mother reported: "I give bottled water to my baby, but buying it for all of us is just too expensive. We don't drink any more than we absolutely have to."

All those quoted live in an area with no public water supply; they depend on private wells. Some feel the best solution is to push for a public water system; others (especially those with wells not yet showing indications of contamination) object to the inevitable increase in property taxes installation of public water will bring. And some feel the water there will never improve and want to move. More 'For Sale' signs are seen in this neighborhood than in surrounding communities. Property values are lower than in comparable neighborhoods nearby.

On Cape Cod, whether served by private wells or public systems, we draw all our water from the same source (unless we use bottled water). Old-timers can tell you where underground gasoline and diesel storage tanks were buried forty and fifty years ago. Many were never removed when a now-forgotten service station went out of business. No one knows whether any gasoline or diesel fuel remained in those tanks or whether the tanks have yet begun to leak. But, unless they are all located and dug up, common sense tells us, sooner or later they will leak and whatever was in the tanks when they were capped and abandoned is destined to end up in our water.

In addition to worrying about effects of population density, some thought should be devoted to hazardous materials of the past and how best to protect our precious water supply from time-bombs that are resting (and rusting), out of sight and out of mind, on sites of long-gone service stations.