

## J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON

# Public should pay to remove underground storage tanks



Underground gasoline storage tanks are a serious threat to our ground water. Most are single-walled steel tanks that can rust through and leak gasoline into the ground water. Just 1 gallon of gasoline can contaminate up to 750,000 gallons of water.

Once gasoline is in the ground water, it's expensive to remove. To prevent contamination, the state of Missouri enforces strict requirements for leak detection, upgrading of old pipes and valves and the removal of unused underground storage tanks, or USTs.

Removing an unused storage tank isn't easy. If it isn't unearthed, it must be emptied, cleaned, and filled with sand, gravel or another inert material. Surrounding soil must be tested for contamination, and any tainted soil must be cleansed. The process can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

It is the owners of local filling stations, not the large petrochemical companies whose names their businesses bear, who are responsible for "remediating" unused storage tanks. But many local owners can't afford to do it and often must choose between protecting the public good at their own expense or abandoning the tanks.

One woman I talked to, for instance, owns a gas station that her late husband operated. She wants to sell the property and retire. Understandably, nobody wants to buy the station while old, unremediated tanks remain. The cost of remediation could cost her most or all of her equity in the property — money that she had counted on.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources enforces regulations regarding unused underground storage tanks. While the agency demands the tanks be properly decommissioned and surrounding soil and water be cleansed, it cannot provide technical or financial assistance.

"I don't have any legal authority to do anything" besides enforce the regulations, DNR director David Shorr said. "I can only do what the law gives me authority to do.

"This is a case of half a loaf," he continued. "All the states that surround Missouri have remediation

funds, where a party can go to the remediation fund and get some relief in order to remove those tanks at partial state expenditure. Iowa has one of the better programs in the United States. We don't."

Senate Bill 171 would change that. "Senate Bill 171 would provide a remediation fund — about \$60 million — for gas stations to be remediated at your and my expense," Shorr said. "The principle of having a remediation fund, like these other states do, is absolutely necessary."

Wholesale gasoline distributors will finance the fund, passing their increased costs to consumers.

"If we don't provide the assistance now to these operators, then they are going to go out of business and abandon their USTs, and it will be our cost anyway," Shorr said. "We may as well garner the cost from the people who are actually demanding the resource, rather than a general tax that costs everybody to clean up these messes."

Underground storage tank regulations hit small town stations the hardest. Without a remediation fund, small town operators won't be able to upgrade their storage systems or remove leaky tanks and pipes. Many will go out of business. When a filling station in a small town shuts down, it can devastate the local economy.

One of the greatest environmental challenges we face is reconciling environmental protection with private interest. Most underground storage tanks in use today were installed prior to current regulations. New tanks are installed by companies more aware of liability. Many offer top-quality tanks with advanced leak detection systems.

It is not right to demand that private owners pay the enormous cost of complying with laws designed to protect our common ground water. This is a situation in which the public should take financial responsibility for its own interests.