

State health and environmental agencies will seek legislation to outlaw spreading of oil-well brine for ice and dust control on roads in Ohio. The agencies also will move to ban so-called annular disposal of brine.

The decision to lobby to ban brine on roads comes in the wake of results of a chemical analysis of oil-well brine around the state that found high

concentrations of the cancer-causing chemical benzene as well as concentrations of toluene and xylene.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the Ohio Department of Health will lobby for the oil regulation changes.

Proposed legislation hasn't been written yet, a resources department spokeswoman said. She also said she does not know who in the Legislature will sponsor the legislation.

Brine is the salty byproduct of oil and gas production. Illegal disposal of brine is believed responsible for the contamination of water wells around the state.

Annular disposal of brine is the return of brine to underground rock formations by allowing it to flow by the force of gravity between the well casings of a producing well.

The two methods of brine disposal have been criticized on grounds that their environmental safety is not known.

Renee Houser, chief of the ODNR's Division of Oil and Gas, said the benzene study "raises new questions about whether annular disposal and road spreading of brine might lead to contamination of ground water supplies used for drinking water."

Ms. Houser said an estimated 160,000 barrels of brine are produced daily in Ohio and the agency believes most of the brine is spread on roads to control ice and dust.

Under current law, local governments may authorize road spreading. A small amount of brine is disposed of through annular disposal.

Agency officials said additional research is needed to determine whether benzene can enter the ground water through currently authorized disposal methods.

ODNR and state EPA officials said they will collect samples from water wells known to be contaminated by brine, and from wells adjacent to roads on which brine is spread to determine whether the carcinogens are present.

"Until we do further research, we will not know whether benzene is entering the ground water from oil-field brine," said ODNR's Deputy Thomas Sherman.

"In the meantime, we must take action to ensure the safety of our drinking water supplies." dl

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