

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency have joined forces in seeking legislation to ban the disposal of oil field brine that may threaten drinking water.

No hard evidence exists that brine, which routinely is spread on unpaved roads to control dust, has contaminated ground water. But the concentrations of the carcinogens benzene, toluene and xylene found in samples of oil field brine suggest a potential for contamination of drinking water supplies.

The state estimates that 160,000 barrels of brine, a saltwater byproduct of oil and gas wells, is produced daily in Ohio. Most is spread on roads and a limited quantity is returned to the ground through annular disposal between the well casings.

The state agencies plan to collect samples from water wells contaminated by brine and from wells near roads on which brine is spread to learn whether the carcinogens are present and in what quantities. Further tests are planned to determine whether benzene can enter ground water via the present brine disposal methods.

As a matter of fairness, the state agencies should move expeditiously in making these determinations so as not to unnecessarily impede oil and gas production.

At the same time, precautions, including legislative sanctions, ought to be pursued to ensure that ground water supplies are not being contaminated because of presently accepted brine disposal methods.

CITATION (HARVARD STYLE)

1986, 'BRINE AND GROUND WATER', *Columbus Dispatch, The (OH)*, 28 Apr, p. 8A, (online NewsBank).

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