

# SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

## Banned gas additive returning to Canadian tanks

BY JEREMY NELSON

WINNIPEG (CUP) - A banned gasoline additive containing the neurotoxin manganese will soon be back in Canadian gas tanks following a multi-million dollar settlement between the Canadian government and the American-based Ethyl Corporation, manufacturer of the controversial additive MMT.

Canada originally banned MMT in 1996 amid fears that the manganese contained in the octane enhancer could cause memory impairment, tremors, and in extreme cases, psychosis similar to that caused by Parkinson's Disease.

Ethyl responded to the ban by using the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] to sue Canada, claiming the ban had damaged the company's reputation and caused it to lose profits.

The multi-million dollar suit drew international attention because it was the first time a corporation used the free-trade agreement to sue a national government. Ethyl relied on chapter 11 of

NAFTA in launching the suit. This section allows corporations to sue the government for compensation if that government passes a law that harms a corporation's profits or reputation.

Aside from paying \$13 million in damages to Ethyl in the settlement, the federal government has also agreed to allow MMT back into the Canadian market and issued a statement that the additive poses no health threat.

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade spokesperson, Dexter Bishop, Canada decided to settle the case because it was the most pragmatic option.

"It was a move to negotiate a settlement to avoid protracted legal procedure and really to make sure that we could settle this case really quickly," Bishop said.

"The longer you leave a case running, frankly, the more expensive it becomes."

Ethyl could not be reached for comment. However, a statement issued to the news media shortly after the settlement said the company was pleased by the result of

the case.

As for whether or not the manganese in MMT is harmful to the health of Canadians, Bishop says that the jury is still out.

"Many people have been involved in the studies of manganese fuel additives and I presume many of those studies will continue," he said. "The government's opinion at this time is that there is no conclusive proof with regard to MMT's effects on human health."

Preliminary research conducted by neurotoxicologist Donna Mergler of the University of Quebec suggests even low-level exposure to manganese can cause serious problems, especially in children and the elderly. In a study of 306 people in southwestern Quebec, Mergler correlated manganese blood levels with neurological problems.

Mergler believes the additive should be shelved un-

til proper studies can be conducted.

"It is regrettable that over the last 20 years, we have not done more research on either MMT or manganese," she said. "Had we spent the \$13 million that was given to the Ethyl Corporation on research we might have had more answers today."

But Ethyl says MMT causes no risk to human health. In a prepared statement, the company pointed to a 1994 Health Canada risk assessment study of MMT and a 1998 study by the Research Triangle Institute to show the harmlessness of the additive.

John Urquart, a spokesperson for the Council of Canadians, a 100,000 member public interest group, says Mergler's findings are just one example that demonstrates the harmful effects of MMT have long been known about.

"MMT is banned in California and through

most of the Eastern seaboard," he said. "Eighty-five percent of American gasoline is MMT free," he said, adding most European countries have also banned the additive.

Urquart says he views the section in NAFTA under which the suit was lodged as a means for corporations to bully governments into rolling back protective legislation.

Aside from concerns about health-effects of the manganese in MMT, automakers also say MMT is bad for engine parts that control vehicle emissions.

"We were very disappointed that the government backtracked and removed the ban on MMT," said Greg Gibson, a spokesperson for General Motors of Canada. "MMT does increase smog-causing hydro-carbon emissions."

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