

# **Petroleum Tank Release Fund**

An analysis of issues surrounding the solvency of the Fund

**A Report to the Legislative Finance Committee  
and the Environmental Quality Council**

July 2008



**Petroleum Tank Release Fund Subcommittee  
2007-08 Interim**



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## **Petroleum Tank Release Fund Subcommittee A joint subcommittee of LFC and EQC**

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## Overview

The Petroleum Tank Release Fund Subcommittee, a joint body of the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) and the Environmental Quality Council (EQC), met on May 13, 2008, and June 4, 2008, to consider issues surrounding the solvency of the Petroleum Tank Release Fund (the Fund), which posted a \$2.4 million shortfall in FY 2007.

The Fund is the default payor for cleanup of releases (spills, leaks) from underground and aboveground petroleum storage tanks, as well as home heating oil tanks. In FY 2008, the Fund continues to fall short in paying for submitted cleanup plans. A total of \$4.54 million has been paid in FY 2008, including \$1.86 million in deferred payments from FY 2007. Another roughly \$2.8 million in submitted plans remains outstanding, while the Fund estimates that it has another \$5 million in liabilities that has yet to be submitted. These estimates are for tank releases that are known. They do not include releases that have yet to be discovered.

This report is a summary of the subcommittee's work and information gathered thus far. The subcommittee is asking the LFC and EQC to review this work and provide direction as to how to proceed. The subcommittee does not feel, at this time, that its purpose is to recommend legislation, but would be willing to do so, if directed.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the subcommittee feels that it could be appropriate for the committees of the whole to review the issues surrounding the Fund's solvency and backlog in payments for cleanups.

The Petroleum Tank Release Compensation Board (the Board), a citizen board that oversees the Fund, has proposed legislative changes for the 2009 Session as a way to increase revenue and improve the Fund's solvency. These include raising the fuel tax that finances the Fund to a full cent per gallon (currently it's \$.0075/gallon) and raising the deductible that tank owners and operators pay to the Fund for their portion of cleanup costs when a release occurs. The subcommittee has taken no position on any of these proposals.<sup>2</sup>

The subcommittee has also learned that the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has agreed to participate in a voluntary audit of 14 state petroleum cleanup programs by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) this year. The involved programs represent those with the largest backlog of cleanups in the country, or the greatest percentage backlog in their region, as is the case for Montana.

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<sup>1</sup> The subcommittee report was approved for publication by the EQC on September 9, 2008, but the EQC gave no further direction that the subcommittee should continue its work or develop legislative proposals.

<sup>2</sup> On September 9, 2008, the EQC did approve, for purposes of pre-introduction, a bill draft proposal from the DEQ, which would incorporate several of the proposals made by the Board.

## Findings

### **Task: Examine the backlog in payments from the Petroleum Tank Release Fund for cleanup at petroleum release sites**

**Finding 1:** Petroleum tank owners and operators rely on the Fund as the default payor for cleanups, instead of the payor of last resort.

**Finding 2:** Payments are limited to available Fund revenue, generated by a \$.0075/gallon fuel tax. The tax does not generate enough revenue to cover all existing cleanup plans.

**Finding 3:** The backlog is caused by the lengthy amount of time that it takes for a cleanup and ground water monitoring to be completed, in accordance with water quality standards followed by the DEQ. These standards are defined in documents known as "Circular DEQ-7" and "Technical Guidance Document #7".

**Finding 4:** The Fund is using a prioritization system to pay for cleanups at the most hazardous sites first; lower priority sites languish, unable to be closed.

**Finding 5:** There is disagreement between industry, the Board, and the DEQ as to the extent that cleanups should occur, in order to facilitate more site closures.

**Finding 6:** The EPA encourages states to use a "risk-based" approach in cleaning up petroleum releases, allowing contaminants to remain in the soil or ground water if they pose no risk of spreading or causing harm.

**Finding 7:** Montana uses a "risk based" approach to develop site cleanup plans. But if contaminants exceed water quality standards followed by the DEQ, a risk based approach isn't used to close the site. Contaminants can't remain as long as the water quality standards aren't met.

**Finding 8:** Revenue from the existing fuel tax is likely to remain flat or decline as motorists reduce their consumption in response to rising fuel prices. For that same reason, it's unlikely that the Legislature would pass a fuel tax increase, as proposed by the Board.

**Finding 9:** Montana is not ready to transition to a system that requires tank owners and operators to obtain private insurance to pay for petroleum cleanups. Experience with private insurance has been mixed in other states, where some insurers are declining to cover petroleum releases or are taking long periods of time to pay claims.

**Finding 10:** Increasing the deductibles that are applied to cleanups paid by the Fund, as proposed by the Board, would result in higher out-of-pocket costs or insurance premiums for tank owners and operators.

## **Background**

The subcommittee is a joint body of the LFC and the EQC, which have both heard past reports about the solvency of the Fund. There has been general concern for several years about the future of the Fund, which was the subject of a legislative audit published in November 2003. The audit recommended that Montana transition from reliance on the Fund to private insurance coverage. The audit said the Legislature could consider options that would ease the transition, including an interim reinsurance/excess coverage program. To date, this has not occurred. Ten other states have transitioned to private insurance.<sup>3</sup>

### **National Snapshot of State Cleanup Funds**

Montana is not alone in its difficulty. Nine states have cleanup funds for which outstanding claims exceed the available account balance.<sup>4</sup>

Owners of federally regulated underground storage tanks are required by the EPA to have the financial means (\$1 million) to pay for cleanup costs and third-party damages caused by releases from their tanks. Federally regulated tanks include those (and their connecting pipes) with a capacity greater than 1,100 gallons. They do not include home heating oil tanks and farm or residential tanks with a capacity of less than 1,100 gallons used for noncommercial purposes. Although exempt from federal regulation, those kinds of tanks and aboveground storage tanks are, under Montana statute, eligible to be covered by the Fund.

Private insurance, self-insurance, bonding, and other resources can be used by tank owners and operators to comply with the EPA's \$1 million "Financial Responsibility" requirement. State funds, whose operations are approved by the EPA, like Montana's, also qualify as evidence of Financial Responsibility. State funds have been the primary source of proving Financial Responsibility since the late 1980s. At that time, many state funds were created because of what was seen as a lack of available and affordable private insurance options, especially for "mom and pop" gas stations, and a desire to keep petroleum cleanups moving forward.

Since the mid-1990s, the national backlog of underground storage tank cleanups has been consistently declining from a high of 171,795 sites in 1995 to 108,766 at the end of FY 2007.<sup>5</sup> However, the number of cleanups being completed each year is also declining.<sup>6</sup> Last year, the EPA began an effort to better understand the reasons behind the backlog. The EPA's initial work found that 54% of all backlogged sites are over 10 years old (in Montana it's 55%<sup>7</sup>) and that

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<sup>3</sup>Summary of State Fund Survey Results, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, June 2008.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>"Addressing the Cleanup Backlog: Phase 2 Study", EPA, page 1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, page 2.

<sup>7</sup> "Montana Backlog Background", EPA, June 4, 2008.

many sites in the backlog are either owned or affiliated with a few "brand name" companies.<sup>8</sup> The EPA says that this suggests that by focusing on older sites or brand name companies, among other things, there may be opportunities for developing targeted strategies to address the backlog.

The EPA is continuing its audit this year by looking more closely at the 14 states with the largest backlogs in the country or the greatest percentage backlog in their region, as is the case for Montana (about 38% according to the DEQ and EPA). The audit is voluntary, and the DEQ and the Fund have agreed to participate.

### **Snapshot of Montana's Situation**

When a petroleum release occurs in Montana, the cleanup process generally follows the chronological order outlined in Appendix A, a flowchart published by the DEQ, recognizing that variations can occur, depending on individual site characteristics. Generally speaking, the DEQ's role in the process is to decide how a site should be cleaned up and when it should be done. The Board's role is limited to fiscal matters only, reviewing the cost of DEQ-approved work plans and paying eligible reimbursement claims as they're submitted.

Appendix B details payments by the Board according to the fiscal year in which they were paid and the year in which the affiliated release or releases were discovered.

As of May 7, 2008, a total of 4,414 releases have been identified in Montana since the Fund came into existence nearly 2 decades ago. Of those, 2,708 have been resolved and 1,706 remain active.<sup>9</sup> Historically (1990-2007), Montana has averaged 150 site closures each year. In the last 5 years, the closure rate has fluctuated between 32 and 88 a year. As of September 4, 2008, 51 sites have been evaluated for closure in this calendar year; 40 have been approved.<sup>10</sup>

### **New Releases**

In 2007, Montana identified 67 new petroleum releases, 83% of which involve gasoline or diesel products. These discoveries follow the trend over the past several years in which between 50 and 70 new releases were discovered each year.<sup>11</sup>

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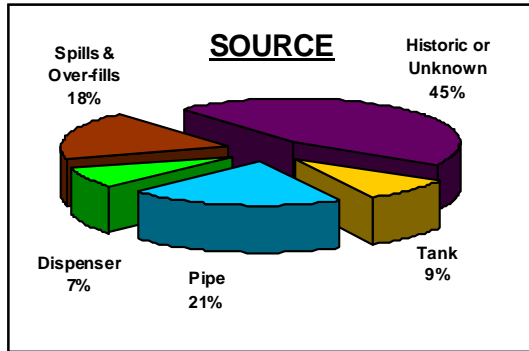
<sup>8</sup> "Addressing the cleanup backlog: Phase 2 Study", EPA, page 3.

<sup>9</sup> DEQ Petroleum Technical Section Activity Report, May 7, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Kenney, Section Supervisor, DEQ Petroleum Technical Section, Sept. 4, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> "Release Autopsies -- 2007", DEQ.





**Figure 1: The sources of petroleum releases discovered in 2007, according to the DEQ.**

Historic contamination remains the primary source of new releases, accounting for 39% in 2007. (Historic and unknown sources combine for 45% in Figure 1.) Historic contamination is mainly discovered through environmental assessments or unrelated construction activities, according to the DEQ. The agency also says that these releases don't provide much information to help prevent future releases because most of the historical contamination originated from older tanks systems that were constructed, installed, and operated much differently from the current equipment in service today. The DEQ expects that

historic contamination will continue to make up a significant proportion of newly discovered releases. However, the agency says that there are a finite number of unknown historic contamination sites out there; so as they're found, their significance will decline over time.

The DEQ has identified piping components as the weak link in active tank systems. Retrofitting existing tank systems with secondary containment and inspecting existing secondary containment can help prevent releases to the environment.<sup>12</sup> The DEQ says that educating gas station employees and the public could also reduce the number of spills and overfills.

### Revenue Generation

The Fund is currently financed with a \$.0075/gallon fuel tax that has generated more than \$6 million in revenue annually since 2000. Revenue is expected to remain flat or decline, given the state of the market, as motorists reduce consumption. This fall, the Revenue and Transportation Interim Committee (RTIC) will update the Fund's revenue projections. The last time that the RTIC did so in November 2006, it projected a revenue increase for the Fund of \$300,000 to \$500,000 between FY 2007 and FY 2009. (See Appendix C.)

Fund expenditures have varied between \$5.5 million and \$9.4 million annually since 2000. This includes an average of \$1.6 million in annual administrative costs that come directly out of the Fund and that are not paid by general fund money.

The citizen board that oversees the Fund has proposed legislative changes to improve the Fund's solvency. These include raising the fuel tax to a full cent per gallon and obligating administrative costs to the general fund or another revenue source. The Board also proposes increasing the deductible that owners and operators pay when a leak occurs from \$17,500 an incident to \$25,000 an incident, plus 5% of the total bill between \$50,000 and \$1 million. The Board feels that this would encourage greater use of private insurance. The subcommittee has taken no position on any of these proposals.

<sup>12</sup> "Release Autopsies -- 2007", DEQ.

The Fund has developed a prioritization system to clean up what are considered to be the most hazardous sites first. However, that leaves less funding available for lower-priority sites where cleanup efforts may be closer to wrapping up.

### Private Insurance

Current use of private insurance appears to be limited, with the Fund remaining the default payor for many cleanups at petroleum release sites. With mixed experience in other states, where some insurers are declining to cover petroleum releases or are taking long periods of time to pay claims, the subcommittee does not feel that Montana is ready to transition to a system that mandates use of private insurance for all tank owners and operators. Even when an insurance policy exists, some tank owners and operators acknowledge that they don't report releases to the insurer, but instead seek payment for cleanup directly from the Fund.

According to data collected through the state's permitting system for federally regulated underground storage tanks, 1,340 tank owners and operators in Montana report that they have some mechanism in place to meet the federal Financial Responsibility requirement of \$1 million. Most notably, 522 claim self-insurance, 341 report that they have private insurance, and 781 rely on the Fund to show Financial Responsibility. A small number of others use mechanisms such as surety bonds, letters of credit, and trust funds.

Of the top 21 most expensive petroleum releases in Montana (costing more than \$500,000 to clean up), 3 did not have insurance, the cause of 5 others was undetermined and therefore an insurer was unlikely to pay for cleanup, and 12 others went to subrogation.

### Subrogation

Collecting payment from private insurance can be complicated, given that a property owner may have purchased policies from multiple insurers over the years or that a historically contaminated property may have changed hands one or several times before the release is discovered. The Fund uses a third party to ferret out these channels of payment, a process known as subrogation. Depending on how the money is recovered (by settlement, through trial, etc), the third party is paid 22 to 25% of the recovered amount for its services, plus a \$70 an hour fee.

Since 2004, the Board has recovered \$1.2 million through subrogation and has paid \$250,000 in fees to the third party. The Board has also paid an additional \$829,000 in other legal fees and court costs. In FY 2004, these expenditures amounted to 38% of the Board's staff budget. In FY 2006, they amounted to 48% of the Board's staff budget. In FY 2008, they amounted to 23.5% of the Board's staff budget.

It appears that the Board did not actively seek to recover cleanup costs from insurance companies for any release until about 6 years ago. Several of those attempts have since gone to litigation. In 2006, the Montana Supreme Court ruled that the statute of limitations that applies to these cases is 8 years and that the clock starts running at the time that the release is discovered. In the 2006 case, the Board was seeking to recover \$254,842 in cleanup costs from the insurer of a gas station in Butte. The release was discovered in 1989. The Board didn't

submit a claim to the insurer until 2001. The court ruled that that was well after the statute of limitations had expired and the insurer didn't have to pay. The Board sought to have the ruling overturned. On June 3, 2008, the Montana Supreme Court affirmed its 2006 ruling, again stating that the 8 year statute of limitations applies and the clock begins at the time that a release is discovered.

Given these rulings, it appears that the Board may no longer seek insurance payments on any of the top 21 most expensive releases (to date), among others. Allan Payne, subrogation attorney for the Board, is currently evaluating releases from July 2000 to ensure that the Board files any necessary claims before the statute of limitations runs out on those cases this month. The Board didn't take similar action after the first ruling in 2006, choosing instead to try to have the ruling overturned. In the time between the court's 2006 and 2008 rulings, \$11.8 million in costs surpassed the 8 year statute of limitations.

### Extent of Cleanups

There is disagreement between industry, the Board, and the DEQ as to the extent that cleanups should occur. (The DEQ must approve the work plan for the cleanup of each release.) The DEQ says that Montana has stricter statutory and constitutional environmental standards than many states, which must be met before a site can be considered "cleaned up" and closed. Industry argues that the DEQ has made its own "policy" decisions to follow more stringent protocols than required by statute and the constitution. The Board feels that "lesser" cleanups could be possible to facilitate more efficient and cost-effective site closures. The subcommittee hasn't resolved the differences in these opinions.

In Article II, section 3, the Montana Constitution grants state residents the inalienable right to a clean and healthful environment. The Montana Supreme Court has defined this fundamental right, paraphrased as follows:

The constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment includes being free from unreasonable degradation (significant impact on the environment) . . . and this right is anticipatory and preventative in nature.<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean, however, that there can't be any adverse change to the environment. The Montana Supreme Court has also held that the environmental provisions of the constitution apply not only to state actions but also to private actions and therefore private parties.<sup>14</sup>

In statute, the provisions of Title 75, chapters 5 and 6, MCA, provide regulatory guidance regarding prevention, abatement, and control of the pollution of Montana waters. Water quality

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<sup>13</sup> Montana Environmental Information Center v. Department of Environmental Quality, 1999 MT 248, 296 Mont. 207, 988 P.2d 1236 (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Cape-France Enterprises v. Estate of Peed, 2001 MT 139, 305 Mont. 513, 29 P.3d 1011 (2001).

laws govern only certain state waters, including surface or underground bodies of water, irrigation systems, or drainage systems.<sup>15</sup> Montana water quality laws regulate every entity in the state, including individuals, businesses, organizations, and units of government. However, water quality laws regulate only certain uses, including entailing potential pollution (either point source or nonpoint source). Appendix D offers further discussion of these statutory and constitutional requirements.

The DEQ says that it can't close a petroleum release site until the site has met: (1) drinking water standards and health standards, as prescribed by Circular DEQ-7 (Appendix E) for class I, II, or III ground water; or (2) the health standards for carcinogens, as prescribed by Circular DEQ-7 for class IV ground water. These standards were developed in accordance with the Montana water quality laws and the federal Clean Water Act, with guidance from the EPA. The standards are updated as additional information or guidance from the EPA becomes available.<sup>16</sup>

The DEQ also follows standards for soil and ground water assessment and cleanup set forth in DEQ Technical Guidance Document 7 (Appendix F). Industry says that these standards are more stringent than necessary and haven't been adopted through rulemaking.

The DEQ says that it understands the burden that long-term ground water monitoring, used at many cleanup sites, can put on the Fund and the frustration that it can cause for property and tank owners, who'd like to see their cleanup resolved. The DEQ says that it's looking more closely at closing sites where contaminants could be left in the ground, if they pose no risk of spreading or causing harm. This is called "risk-based site closure".

The EPA has recommended this risk-based approach since the 1990s. The EPA recently told the DEQ that the approach has been used in other states to effect faster and cheaper cleanups, while still protecting human health and the environment.<sup>17</sup> Industry and the Board say to address Montana's backlog, it'll be necessary to leave contaminants in the ground where possible. Industry says that it won't support the proposal to increase the deductibles that tank owners and operators pay as part of state-funded cleanups, unless the DEQ alters its protocols.

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<sup>15</sup> 75-5-103(29)(a), MCA

<sup>16</sup> Circular DEQ-7, February 2006, <http://www.deq.mt.gov/wqinfo/Circulars.asp>

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Janice Pearson, EPA Region 8 UST Team Leader to Michael Trombetta, chief of the Hazardous Waste Site Cleanup Bureau at the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, June 4, 2008.