

PETROL, LIMITS ON METHYLTERTIARYBUTYLETHER

118. Hon Jim Scott to the Minister for Housing and Works representing the Minister for the Environment and Heritage
- (1) Is the Minister aware that the Federal Government is examining whether to permit the importation of petrol containing the additive MTBE (methyltertiarybutylether)?
  - (2) Does the Minister consider that petrol with MTBE is a threat to groundwater?
  - (3) Has the Minister been in communication with the Federal Government regarding the proposed changes?
  - (4) If so, did or will the Minister oppose or support the proposal to import petrol with MTBE?

Hon TOM STEPHENS replied:

- (1) Last month the Federal Minister for the Environment Robert Hill announced national fuel quality standards (through the Fuel Quality Standards Act 2000) limiting levels of MTBE in petrol to 1% by volume, to take effect from 1 January 2004.  
  
The Department of Environmental Protection has advised that the Fuel Quality Standards Act 2000 will remain 'silent' on MTBE until 2004, which means that Western Australia is able to maintain current limits on MTBE in petrol until 1 January 2004. The Western Australian Environmental Protection (Diesel and Petrol) Regulations 1999 specify that petrol cannot contain more than 0.1% MTBE, which is effectively an allowance for trace contamination of petrol.
- (2) If present in significant concentrations, or poorly managed, MTBE is considered to be a threat to groundwater resources. MTBE is soluble in water, is not readily lost from water by evaporation and is not readily biodegradable, leading to persistence in groundwater for many years after initial contamination.
- (3) The DEP has held negotiations with the Federal Government's environmental agency, Environment Australia, to seek to maintain Western Australia's limits on MTBE following the introduction of national fuel quality standards. These negotiations are continuing.
- (4) The Minister supports the current approach to this issue in Western Australia, including the stringent standards, and is opposed to any fuel management practices that represent a likelihood of significant groundwater contamination.