



THE MENACE FROM BENEATH

By Monroe S. Miller

It's a fairly common human instinct to fear the new more than the familiar. But a recent study by the Environmental Protection Agency that I read about indicates that ignoring the dangers of familiar and quite simple technology could be lethal. It is a technical problem that likely affects most of us managing a golf course. The threat discussed in this EPA report is the one that our underground fuel tanks pose to groundwater.

It isn't news that I think Golf Course Superintendents are among the most responsible environmentalists in our country, and since we do often store fuel underground, it is imperative that we cooperate fully with proposed programs to stem this threat. In a random sampling of 433 of the country's 800,000 underground storage tanks that hold gasoline and diesel fuel, the EPA found that as many as 35% of the

tanks leak. This is a far higher percentage than has ever been predicted by the fuel industry analysts. We all know that fuels contain some toxic chemicals (some are carcinogenic) and the danger to public health could be catastrophic. In fact, with about half of the U.S. relying on groundwater, the harm could potentially be greater than that caused by toxic waste dumps, according to some experts.

Compounding the problem is the fact that recent innovations to reduce the leakage are not working as originally believed. Inspired by concern about groundwater pollution, Congress passed legislation in 1984 that required new tanks be constructed from fiberglass or some other non-corrosive material to prevent the kind of leakage that occurs in steel tanks. About 90% of the underground fuel tanks in America are currently made of steel.

Well, it turns out that fiberglass tanks leak at the same rate as steel ones.

Our country's dependence on groundwater is too great for a wait and see attitude. Fast action is required. Any program ought to include research to find those materials suitable for the construction and coating of underground tanks. I cannot believe that this is an insurmountable problem for engineers. Secondly, more use of technology currently available is important; cathodic protection is one example of a process seldom used to my knowledge.

Finally, tanks now in use need to be located and tested for leakage so that an assessment can be made of the threat they pose to groundwater. Those that are hazardous need to be drained and taken out of service. The State of Wisconsin's Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations has been assigned the responsibility of inventorying underground petroleum tanks. If your golf course stores fuel underground, please get a form from your fuel supplier or from DILHR and fill it out.

Remember, groundwater is worth protecting. The solutions will be expensive. But surely this is a problem better paid for now than later.

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