

Lodian's efforts help ban MTBE

Single mom lobbied lawmakers, led signature drive

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By Jeff Hood Lodi Bureau Chief

Lodi's Jodi Waters had reason to celebrate New Year's Eve, but for something more substantial than changing her calendar.

Waters, who started California Oxybusters in 1996, saw her seven-year quest reach fruition when the state banned the fuel additive MTBE from gasoline supplies effective Wednesday.

As the organization's president, Waters lobbied state officials, became a regular guest on talk radio and led a signature drive to push for legislation banning the chemical, which has contaminated some communities' drinking-water supplies.

"It's kind of funny," the 50-year-old Waters said last week. "I was really cynical, and I never thought one person could make a difference. I taught myself something: One person can make a difference."

A year after starting Oxybusters, Waters and her group had convinced the Legislature and then-Gov. Pete Wilson to pass a law to study the effects of MTBE, which led to Wednesday's ban. The Outdoor Writers Association of California named Waters their Californian of the Year in 2000.

Ethanol is the gas additive Californians put in their tanks now, but the state Air Resources Board is trying to convince federal regulators that oxygenates -- chemicals that make fuel burn cleaner -- are no longer needed.

"We tend to look at cars and fuels as a system that works together," said Gennet Paauwe, a spokeswoman for the Air Resources Board. "When you have a car with a certain emissions-control system, you have to have a gasoline that supports that. The cars have gotten so good at removing pollutants, and we have the cleanest gas for sale in the world."

California's refineries began adding MTBE to gasoline in 1992 as part of federal regulations to improve air quality, choosing it over ethanol, which at the time was less plentiful.

Waters lived at a mobile-home park off Highway 99 when she became concerned about the health effects of MTBE. She took her neighbor to a hospital emergency room four times for breathing problems and soon noticed her athletic daughters were developing similar troubles.

She made the link with MTBE after hearing a University of Pennsylvania researcher discussing the chemical's harmful effects and called him. He, in turn, sent her a list of other Californians who had contacted him. They met in Castro Valley and voted Waters president.

"From there it snowballed," Waters said. "I'm a quick study, and I just devoured the information on MTBE."

She said the federal oxygenate requirement for fuel exists because it benefits two powerful industries -- oil companies that manufacture MTBE as a byproduct of the refining process and agriculture interests that grow the corn typically used to make ethanol.

Waters said the stakes were so high that she received threats on her life.

"Somebody broke into my house, put me up against a wall and said I'd better stop doing what I was doing," Waters said, adding she was unable to identify the assailant because he wore a ski mask.

That didn't stop Waters, a single mother of four who worked her accounting practice around her efforts to ban MTBE.

"In five months, we got over 220,000 signatures on petitions to get that bill passed," she said. "That hadn't happened before in the state of California."

Waters said she's against requiring ethanol in gasoline as well, but Oxybusters is all but dissolved after winning the fight against MTBE. Ethanol has its downside, too, according to Paauwe. It allows gas to vaporize at lower temperatures, which has the potential to harm air quality.

"Until people get tired of paying for something that's totally unnecessary, we're going to have them in our gas," Waters said. "In the future, we're going to see cars running on hydrogen fuel cells and we'll get off oil completely. But it's going to be years before we get there."

[Stockton Record commentary, Jan. 4, 2004:](#)

Burn barrel days to go up in smoke

By Francis P. Garland

I can't remember exactly when I met my first burn barrel.

But to say it was love at first sight wouldn't be a major exaggeration. Maybe it had something to do with man's primeval attraction to fire. I never thought about it in those terms, though, not when I barely could see over the top of the rusty, round vessel.

There, in the woods of western Pennsylvania, the burn barrel and I grew, well, attached during a relationship that started with Kennedy in the White House and died about the same time disco did.

As children, we all had our household chores and one of mine was to "burn the papers."

Paper trail

In my case, however, "the papers" included not only rare scraps of actual paper but virtually everything that today would end up in a landfill or a recycling station. In fact, it was the barely-burnable stuff that made the job so darn enjoyable -- and somewhat risky business for a 10-year-old.

The short walk from the back door to the barrel stoked my anticipation. I equated it to the stroll a hitter takes from the dugout to home plate. You knew something was going to happen and, if you had confidence in your burn-ability (that's burn-barrel jargon), you figured it could be explosive.

Rarely was I disappointed. From the moment the match head ignited until the glow from the last ash faded, the experience created unique sights and smells that -- like the burning equivalent of a snowflake -- never could be duplicated. (And, as health and air-quality officials might tell you today, never SHOULD be duplicated).

More importantly, the experience created something else always appreciated on a Rust Belt winter day -- heat. I remember standing close to the barrel, then moving closer and closer until it felt like I was on the sun's doorstep. And still never quite warm enough.

Burned

One particular day, I crept too close. Standing on a cement block at the barrel's base, I rocked back and forth when -- mesmerized by the exotic fire tips jumping and shimmying -- I lost my balance and fell against the barrel. I never will forget that sickly burning smell of hand skin sizzling against the barrel.

The resulting scar hardly deterred me from future barrel dates. No, those continued for another 10 years or so, with one ash-filled barrel eventually giving way to another and then another, until the day I set out for California.

That's when the fire went out. Although I've spent well over half of my life in California, I've never burned anything in a barrel here, even when legally allowed to do so.

My current home even has a burn barrel. And many a time I've passed it, I've thought about taking the wire mesh screen off the top, removing the broken glass that the previous owner graciously left me, jamming a few papers inside and striking a match against its faded orange chest, just for old time's sake.

But I've never done it. And now I never can -- at least if I want to be a law-abiding citizen.

As of the first of the year, it's illegal to use barrels for outdoor burning in Calaveras County -- and all of California.

State air-resources board officials say using barrels for burning is a public health concern and that barrel-burned household wastes produce toxic pollutants that can linger in the environment -- and our bodies -- for a long time.

Officials say those toxic pollutants can cause cancer, damage the immune system and create other health problems. Some of those cancer-causing pollutants, called dioxins, can be particularly harmful to infants and young children. Smoke produced by burning waste also can trigger asthma attacks.

It's not enough just to stay out of the line of a burn-barrel fire. The toxic pollutants can wind up on soil, plants and in water, and the ash from a burn barrel also can be released into the soil and water. Animals and fish can ingest those substances, plants can absorb them and they can be passed on to people when contaminated food is consumed.

As recently as last year, some 800,000 California households -- including scores in Calaveras County -- could burn some form of household waste in barrels. Not anymore, though. Dry vegetation can be burned in small piles in certain areas, but burn-barrel fires are out, said Lakhmir Grewal, Calaveras County's deputy air-pollution control officer.

"We will enforce the law fully," Grewal said. "If someone is burning in a burn barrel, I'll cite them."

For good reason, too. Grewal said a state survey showed 70 to 90 percent of burn barrels throughout the state contained illegal materials. The barrels made it difficult for enforcement folks such as Grewal.

"In an open pile, I could say, 'That's a glass bottle or plastic jug, and that's not supposed to be there,' " he said. "But I can't control what goes in the barrel."

Grewal said he's not sure how many people will be affected by the new burn-barrel ban. In past years, in more dense communities like San Andreas or Angels Camp, Grewal might have found 10 to 20 barrels burning in a given day. But in more remote enclaves, there's no telling how many burn barrels were used on a regular basis.

Now that the ban is in place, Grewal said he's encouraging residents to be vigilant about neighbors who might be burning illegally.

"If they notice something," he said, "shoot a picture."

In the past, such photos of violations have led to citations, which start at \$125 and can run up to \$1,000 for repeat offenders or those burning particularly noxious materials, Grewal said.

My neighbors need not point their cameras my way. There's no risk of me firing up my barrel in a misguided attempt to rekindle that old-time feeling and recapture my youth.

I'm burned out.