

# Banned gas additive returning to Canadian tanks despite reported dangers

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 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 to sue Canada, claiming the ban had damaged the company's reputation and cost it in lost profits.

The million-dollar suit drew international attention because it was the first time a corporation used a free-trade agreement to sue a national government.

Ethyl relied on chapter 11 of the NAFTA for the suit, a section which allows corporations to sue a 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 to issue a statement saying that the additive poses no health threat.

According to Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade spokesman 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 a protracted legal procedure and

really to make sure that we could settle this case very 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 until 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 poses no risk to human health, pointing to a 1994 Health Canada risk assessment study of MMT and a 1998 study by

the Research Triangle Institute in a prepared statement.

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

"MMT is banned in California and through most of the eastern seaboard," he said. "Eighty-five per cent of Ameri-

can gasoline is MMT free," he said, adding most European countries have also banned the additive.

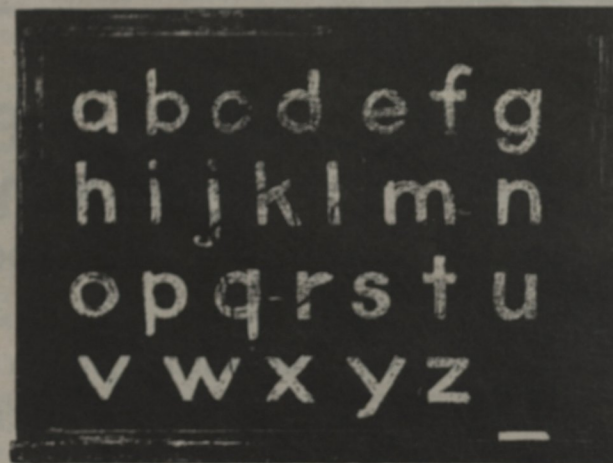
Urquart says he views the section in NAFTA under which the suit was lodged as a means for corporations to bully governments into rolling back protective legislation.

Asides from concerns about the 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 and it does contribute to premature sparkplug failure."

**Most people think  
there's only one way  
to help the  
developing world.  
We have 26.**



You'd be surprised at what 26 letters can do for people in developing countries. They can mean food security, good health and job opportunities because they provide knowledge and skills through education.

To make a donation, or for more information, call 1-800-661-CODE.



Self-sufficiency through literacy in the developing world