

**House of Representatives' Financial Services Committee
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
Testimony of Patricia Tomsho – 09/12/02**

On behalf of the residents of Laurel Gardens, Hazleton City and Hazle Township, Luzerne County, PA, I thank you for allowing us the opportunity to express our serious concerns. I speak not only for our community, but also for the many other communities, which are similarly affected. In fact, in review of the EPA's web site on Leaking Underground Storage Tanks, there are 418,918 confirmed releases. Clearly, our group is not the only affected residential area, so the work you do here will have profound impact on many of your constituents nationwide.

Documentation on the information I am providing you today can be verified in the packet that has been given to you.

Gasoline contains benzene, a known carcinogen, as well as toluene, ethyl benzene and xylene (BTEX), a combination of volatile organic compounds. Also found in unleaded gasoline is MTBE, which is extremely water soluble, but not completely documented in its effect on human health. Our neighborhood was exposed to these chemicals for over 10 years, so the extent of health problems and loss of life remain an enigma.

Map: Affected area; Mine; Xylene plume; Soil contamination; Cancer victims

In Hazle Township, the University of Pittsburgh has completed a health study of 84 homes. Results are pending from a similar study in Hazleton City. As Township residents, we are 10 times more likely to contract leukemia, a benzene-linked illness, 8 times more likely to contract stomach cancer, and 3 times more likely to have prostate cancer than the average Pennsylvanian. These results were verified at 95% validity. My neighborhood also challenges the national average of lupus, an autoimmune disease, with 5 cases per 250 people versus the nation's 1 case per 1000.

I am testifying today to convey to you the fear, hopelessness, and mostly, the loss of personal choice that we as victims of a spill must confront on a daily basis. One such case is a family who started to build a home in the spill zone. The frame is completed, but the bank stopped the mortgage. It is now a skeleton of rotting wood, a visible reminder of loss of property value. When you live in a gasoline-impacted neighborhood, the loss of freedom and control is absolute and very real. To understand the pain of this, please take the time to read the personal stories provided.

The areas over which we have no control include our health, the use of equity in our property and the sale of our property. All of these have a financial impact on the family and the community. Health care is a primary concern: the cost of treatment for cancer is high. One week of chemotherapy costs about \$15,000. The cost to employers for health care continues to rise, not to mention the loss of productive, tax-paying citizens.

People who have small children cannot leave their homes, since they are locked into a mortgage. Others have been unable to obtain or increase a home equity loan,

which may be needed for repairs. Older citizens are unable to sell their homes and move to smaller homes or assisted care. A particularly heart-wrenching case is Mrs. Pauline, who has MDS Leukemia and is now out of remission for the 3rd time. She was recently featured in Mr. Weidenbach's film "Heroes of the Planet," which aired at the International Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Mrs. P. was ordered to leave her home to minimize any additional contact with benzene. How must she feel knowing she has left her son and young grandchildren to live in a house next door? Another homeowner, who was denied a home equity loan by several banking institutions, asks the question, "If our houses are not safe, why should I raise my children here? If our house is safe, then why can't we get a loan?!" Please note that the bank's rejection letter specifying "Contamination" is contained in your packet.

The EPA did institute a cleanup effort; however, the Soil Vapor Extraction system will take 10's of years to affect a cleanup of the soil. The groundwater treatment will need to be operational for a similar period of time. In the meantime, our soil remains contaminated and our groundwater remains contaminated. The mine underlying our property poses additional risks, not present in many other spills. Last week an investigation of a mineshaft revealed gasoline product. This shaft is in a neighbor's back yard. Across the street from me, the monitoring wells in the resident's front yard have gasoline product of 1/4" on top and continue to have high VOC readings. In short, the area remains polluted and the potential for re-contamination of the homes is probable. We remain at risk.

The Legislation you are considering is crucial in many ways; however, it should be across the board and not income-related. The spill is non-discriminatory, affecting old and young, rich and poor. In cases like ours, it is very important to specify the forgiveness aspect and who will make that decision. In our experience, we had to become adversarial with EPA in order to stimulate a serious cleanup effort. Our advocacy was not well received, so a loan program under their auspices would be concerning.

Thank you for your time and attention. The representative of our group and I are available to answer any questions.