

The Star-Ledger

More companies agree to pay millions to clean up N.J. water pollution

By Blake Nelson and Michael Sol Warren

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Aug. 8, 2020

New Jersey will likely pull in another \$14.8 million this year as part of a long-running lawsuit against polluters statewide, which has now earned more than \$369 million overall to help pay cleanup costs.

Two new settlements were announced Monday by the state's environmental protection department, including one against a Woodbridge gas station accused of contaminating local water.

Officials have flagged more than 6,000 places in the state where a chemical called Methyl tert-butyl ether, or MTBE, could be found in the water. While adding MTBE to gasoline can reduce a car's emissions, leaks from underground tanks have led some states to restrict or ban it altogether, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2007, New Jersey sued almost 50 companies for alleged MTBE pollution, including groups making, moving and storing the chemical. Seventeen have paid out at least once, according to the state attorney general's office, including BP and Shell.

One of Monday's settlements targeted the gas station HP Delta, Inc. at 439 Lake Avenue in Woodbridge Township. Owner Robert Melecci and the station will chip in \$1 million while the Deptford-based Dhandi Transport, Inc. will pay \$350,000, although none of them admitted doing anything wrong.

Those payments will also get them off the hook for what was essentially a \$2 million fine issued in 2016, according to a draft of the agreement.

"It's important that this MTBE issue be resolved," said Stuart Lieberman, a lawyer for HP Delta and two people who had complaints against them dropped. "I just wish they didn't have to beat up small operators like the people that ran this gas station."

His clients were "relieved" the process was finally over, he said. "It's really had a terrible toll on their life."

In the other settlement, New York-based Getty Properties Corp. agreed to pay \$13.5 million. They also did not admit wrongdoing.

The public has 60 days to weigh in before a court can formally approve the agreements. (In the chart above, Melecci and Dhandi appear jointly on the last row as "Getty Third Party Defendants.")

Messages left with three lawyers who represent Getty, Melecci, Dhandi and others were not immediately returned, nor were messages left directly with a Getty vice president and a number listed for Dhandi.

Earlier in the summer, New Jersey also reached a \$1.5 million settlement with Total Petrochemicals & Refining USA, according to state records. Cases against ExxonMobil and Gulf/Cumberland Farms are ongoing, according to an attorney general spokesman.