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Odour and flavour thresholds of gasoline additives (MTBE, ETBE and TAME) and their occurrence in Dutch drinking water collection areas

Annemarie van Wezel a,*, Leo Puijker a, Cees Vink a, Ans Versteegh b, Pim de Voogt a,c

a KWR Watercycle Research Institute, Nieuwegein, The Netherlands
b RIVM, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, Bilthoven, The Netherlands
c IBED, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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The use of ETBE (ethyl-tert-butylether) as gasoline additive has recently grown rapidly. Contamination of aquatic systems is well documented for MTBE (methyl-tert-butylether), but less for other gasoline additives. Due to their mobility they may easily reach drinking water collection areas. Odour and flavour thresholds of MTBE are known to be low, but for ETBE and TAME (methyl-tert-amylether) hardly information is available. The objective here is to determine these thresholds for MTBE, ETBE and TAME, and relate these to concentrations monitored in thousands of samples from Dutch drinking water collection areas.

For ETBE odour and flavour thresholds are low with 1–2 lgL/C0 1, for MTBE and TAME they range from 7 to 16 lgL/C0 1.

In most groundwater collection areas MTBE concentrations are below 0.1 lgL/C0 1. In phreatic groundwaters in sandy soils not covered by a protective soil layer, occasionally MTBE occurs at higher concentrations. For surface water collection areas a minority of the locations is free of MTBE. For river bank and dune infiltrates, at a few locations the odour and flavour threshold is exceeded. For ETBE fewer monitoring data are available. ETBE was found in 2 out of 37 groundwater collection areas, in concentrations below 1 lgL/C0 1. In the surface water collection areas monitored ETBE was found in concentrations near to the odour and flavour thresholds.

The low odour and flavour thresholds combined with the high mobility and persistence of these compounds, their high production volumes and their increased use may yield problems with future production of drinking water.

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1. Introduction

Methyl-tert-butylether (MTBE), methyl-tert-amylether (TAME) and ethyl-tert-butylether (ETBE) are fuel oxygenates which are in use as gasoline additives. The use of ETBE as gasoline additive recently increases rapidly in Europe, as a result of the highly debated European Biofuels Directive (2003/30/EC) which sets a minimum market share of biofuels of 5.75% in 2010. Bio-ETBE can be etherised from bioethanol and is considered a biofuel for 47 vol%, and similarly bio-MTBE from biomethanol is considered a biofuel for 36 vol% (2002/30/EC). Addition of bio-MTBE and especially bio-ETBE to gasoline can thus help to fulfil the obligation set by the Biofuel Directive.

The commercial production of MTBE started in the seventies (DeWitt & Company Inc., 2000) and MTBE was introduced into pet-
Procedure. Panelists were preliminary trained and experienced with the
ity of 0.5 of being detected under the conditions of the test.

A study in the Los Angeles area concluded that although alter-
native ether oxygenates (such as TAME and ETBE) are detected in
groundwater beneath leaking underground fuel tanks less frequent
and at lower concentrations than MTBE, these alternative ether
oxygenates pose groundwater contamination threats similar to
MTBE if their scale of use is expanded (Shih et al., 2004).

MTBE and other oxygenates dissolved in water, exhibit a potent
and unpleasant odour for which the human olfactory system is
highly sensitive. Odour and flavour thresholds of MTBE are low
compared to other chemicals, ranging from 2.5 to 190 μgL−1 and
from 2.5 to 680 μgL−1, respectively, (Shen et al., 1997; Davis and
Farland, 2001; ECB, 2002; WHO, 2005). For ETBE and TAME, hardly
any information is available on odour and flavour thresholds in
the open literature.

Toxicological effects of the oxygenates occur at much higher
concentrations than the odour or flavour threshold (ECB, 2002,
2006). Therefore problems related to human health are not ex-
pected at the level of these thresholds. The EPA (1997) set a non-
statutory drinking water advice for MTBE of 20–40μgL−1. WHO
considered setting a drinking water health-based guideline value
unnecessary (Fawell, 2007). In The Netherlands, for MTBE a guide-
line for remediation of contaminated groundwater was advised of
15 μgL−1 based on the odour threshold, whereas for ETBE no such
indicative guideline could be advised thus far because reliable
information on odour and flavour thresholds is lacking (TCB,

Consumers’ perception of the presence of gasoline additives in
drinking water sources might be negative. Because of their physi-
cal–chemical properties, removal of the fuel oxygenates is incom-
plete in routine drinking water treatment. A high concentration of
gasoline additives in sources of drinking water will thus lead to
problems for perception of drinking water quality by consumers.

The objective of this study was to determine odour and flavour
thresholds of MTBE, ETBE and TAME, in order to complete the lack-
ing information for ETBE and TAME, and to compare these thresh-
holds to concentrations of MTBE and ETBE determined in thousands
of samples collected from Dutch water collection areas for drinking
water production, taking into account the geohydrological condi-
tions of the collection areas. We hypothesize that an increased
use of these gasoline additives will be reflected in increased con-
centrations in surface- and groundwaters. Comparing the concen-
trations observed in the drinking water sources with the odour
and flavour thresholds gives an indication of the relevance for
emission reduction measures for these gasoline additives.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Panel test for odour and flavour thresholds of MTBE, ETBE and
TAME

Odour and flavour thresholds of MTBE, ETBE and TAME were
determined according to the European standard method EN
1622-1, a forced-choice paired test (CEN, 2006). In short, at least
8 panelists tested seven concentrations of MTBE, ETBE and TAME
ranging between 0 and 32 μgL−1, prepared in odour and flavour
free drinking water at a temperature of 23 °C. The threshold is de-
fined as the odourant/flavorant concentration which has a probabili-
ty of 0.5 of being detected under the conditions of the test.
Panelists were preliminary trained and experienced with the
procedure.

2.2. Occurrence of MTBE and ETBE in Dutch water collection areas

Monitoring data of MTBE and ETBE in samples from water col-
lection areas for drinking water production in the period 2002–
2007 were collected from Dutch water companies and evaluated.
MTBE and ETBE were analyzed by several laboratories using ana-
lytical purge and trap GC–MS based on ISO 15680. Water samples
were conserved at 1 ≤ pH ≤ 2 with sulfuric acid.

The analyses included 11,680 and 1206 individual data for
MTBE and ETBE, respectively, and included groundwater as well
as surface water samples of in total 196 Dutch water collection
areas for the production of drinking water. The water samples were
not beforehand suspected of contamination related to historical
soil contamination. Collection areas were classified depending on
their geohydrological properties (see Table 1). The concentration
of MTBE or ETBE in the collection area was classified as follows;
<0.1, 0.1–1, 1–5, 5–15, 15–26, 26–260, 260–9400 or >9400 μgL−1.
This classification was based on proposed guidelines for MTBE for
environmental and health protection in The Netherlands (Swartjes
et al., 2004). The highest concentration measured in each water
collection area was used in the data evaluation.

Based on the Dutch contaminated soil database (Kernteam
Landsdekkend Beeld, 2005; Van Wezel et al., 2008), 783 poten-
tially contaminated sites were selected with (former) gas stations
and fillings. The number of potentially contaminated sites per vulnera-
ble water collection areas was determined by geographic informa-
tion system analysis. To assess potential risks to raw water quality,
traveling times of these sites to the water collection areas were cal-
culated by interpolation of isochrones.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the odour and flavour thresholds derived in
this study for MTBE, ETBE and TAME. Especially for ETBE, odour
and flavour thresholds are low, at a level of 1–2 μgL−1. For MTBE
and TAME the odour and flavour threshold are similar to each
other, ranging from 7 to 16 μgL−1.

Table 3 presents data on the occurrence of MTBE in various
types of water collection areas in The Netherlands. In general,
water collection areas related to groundwaters are clean. However,
at 20 freatic groundwater locations from sandy soils not covered by
a protective top soil layer of clay, and in 16 groundwaters from
sandy soil or limestone MTBE was found. In one groundwater col-
lection area the observed concentration of MTBE exceeded the
odour and flavour thresholds. In water from collection areas re-
lated to surface water MTBE was almost invariably detected. At a
few locations for river bank and dune infiltrates, the concentration
of MTBE exceeds the odour and flavour threshold (Table 3). MTBE
concentrations measured repeatedly over time at a single location
may vary from 4- to 15-fold (data not shown); however, the num-
ber of data available per location over time is too scarce to draw
conclusions on temporal trends.

For ETBE, in use as a gasoline additive relatively short compared
to MTBE, fewer monitoring data are available. Out of a total of 37
groundwater collection areas monitored, in two areas ETBE was
detected in concentrations between 0.1 and 1 μgL−1. In all three
water collection areas related to surface water that were moni-
tored, ETBE was found in concentrations between 0.1 and 1 μgL−1.
These ETBE concentrations are near to the odour and flavour
thresholds determined in this study.

The number of potentially contaminated sites –which can act as a
source of MTBE – per water collection area varies from one to up to
40 sites per vulnerable water collection area in urbanized regions
(Fig. 1). All water collection areas mentioned in Table 1 are vulnera-
bility for leakage from a source site, except for GW and SW. Travelling
times for MTBE (introduced in The Netherlands in 1988 as lead substitute in petrol) from potentially contaminated sites to water collection areas appear to be less than 20 years for the majority of potentially contaminated sites (data not shown). Thus, leakage problems are expected to be reflected in the current monitoring data.

4. Discussion

The odour and flavour thresholds found in the current study for MTBE agree well with various literature values. For example, odour and flavour thresholds of 7 and 15 μg L⁻¹ found in the current study for MTBE are comparable with literature values such as 34 and 48 μg L⁻¹ for odour and flavour, respectively (Young et al., 1996), 43–71 (odour) and 24–37 (flavour) μg L⁻¹ (Dale et al., 1997), 15 μg L⁻¹ for both odour and flavour (Pirnie, 1998; Stocking et al., 2001), 18 μg L⁻¹ for odour (Campden 2003, presented in Sufet, 2007) and 7.4 (odour) and 7.3 (flavour) μg L⁻¹ (Danish EPA, 2000). Prah et al. (1994) reported a much higher odour threshold value of 180 μg L⁻¹.

For TAME there are few literature data available: indicative odour and flavour thresholds of 443 and 128 μg L⁻¹ were determined in distilled water (Vetrano, 1993) and taste and odour thresholds of 128 and 27 μg L⁻¹ were reported (EPA, 1999; DNREC, 2001, both references do not refer to the original data source). For ETBE, an odour threshold between 13 and 25 and a taste threshold of 47 μg L⁻¹ were reported (EPA, 1999; EFOA, 2006, both references do not refer to the original data source). For both TAME and ETBE, the thresholds observed in the current study are lower than the scarce literature data available.

From 2000 to 2003 on, respectively, concentrations of MTBE and ETBE have been monitored in the Dutch part of the river Rhine at Lobith. The mean concentrations in 2006 were 0.41 (n = 363) and 0.23 (n = 325) μg L⁻¹, respectively (RIWA, 2006, 2007, 2008). However, contamination with higher concentrations of MTBE and ETBE in the river Rhine occurs frequently, due to spills and shipping, as is apparent from frequently reported incidents in the Rhine alarm system (RIWA, 2006, 2007, 2008, www.aqualarm.nl). As
shown in Fig. 2 for Lobith, in the past few years peak concentrations of ETBE occur more frequently. The flavour and odour threshold established for ETBE in the current study is exceeded regularly in the Rhine, whereas the threshold value for MTBE is exceeded occasionally.

Median and average levels of MTBE in the river Scheldt in the period 2001–2004 are similar to those observed in the Rhine, but maximum levels did not exceed 0.8 μg L\(^{-1}\) (Van den Berg and Puijker, 2005). The concentrations of MTBE in the river Meuse showed high seasonal fluctuations with concentrations exceeding 1 μg L\(^{-1}\) during periods of low river flows and levels below the detection limit at high river discharges (Van den Berg and Puijker, 2005). In the river Meuse the maximum concentration of MTBE reported amounted to 45 μg L\(^{-1}\) (location Roosteren; RIWA, 2005), due to leakages from the petrol industry. In German rivers maximum concentrations of MTBE are reported of 2.4 μg L\(^{-1}\) within urbanized areas, with occasionally peaks up to concentrations of 14 μg L\(^{-1}\) due to incidental illegal spilling (Baus et al., 2005). However, the average concentration of MTBE reported in the downstream parts of the German Rhine amounts to 0.25 μg L\(^{-1}\) (Achten et al., 2002) which is somewhat lower than in The Netherlands.

In shallow water systems, as occur in The Netherlands, groundwater and surface water are strongly interconnected. Thus, contamination of surface waters is reflected after some delay in groundwater quality. The concentrations of MTBE in several of the groundwater samples reported in the current study are relatively high compared to literature sources as reviewed by Rosell et al. (2006) – reporting a median concentration of 0.3 μg L\(^{-1}\) in USA and 0.17 μg L\(^{-1}\) in Germany. In Germany, MTBE occurs in groundwater especially in urbanized areas at median concentrations of 0.18 μg L\(^{-1}\) (Kolb and Puttmann, 2006a).

For the occurrence of ETBE in groundwater hardly any literature data are available (Rosell et al., 2006), although physicochemical models are available to predict groundwater concentrations (Snelling et al., 2007). Shih et al. (2004) reported on groundwater concentrations of MTBE, ETBE and TAME below leaking underground fuel tanks in the Los Angeles region. They found median groundwater concentrations of, respectively, 1200, 4 and 20 μg L\(^{-1}\) reflecting the dominant use of MTBE compared to alternative ether oxygenates. These data on heavily contaminated groundwaters are not comparable to the current study where we focused on water collection areas which were not suspected of contamination beforehand.

Both MTBE and ETBE may permeate from groundwater across piping material made of polyethylene into drinking water, but drinking water concentrations will only be significant at very high groundwater concentrations (exceeding 100 μg L\(^{-1}\); Meerkerk, 2008).

Although challenging due to its physicochemical properties, techniques are available to remove MTBE from groundwater (reviewed by Kolb and Puttmann, 2006b), for example aeration or photodegradation by UV/H\(_2\)O\(_2\) and UV/TiO\(_2\) (Hu et al., 2008). In Germany, concentrations in various finished drinking waters remained below 0.8 μg L\(^{-1}\), with a median concentration of 0.37 ng L\(^{-1}\) (Kolb and Puttmann, 2006b).

Partly on the basis of results from the current study, the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment recently set a value for remediation of 1 μg L\(^{-1}\) within drinking water collection areas for MTBE and ETBE, in accordance with the precautionary principle and the existing drinking water legislation. Outside drinking water collection areas a value of 15 μg L\(^{-1}\) was set (Ministry of VROM, 2008).

### 5. Conclusions

In the present study concentrations of MTBE, ETBE and TAME in water from water extraction areas used for drinking water production in The Netherlands were compared to their odour and flavour thresholds determined through new panel tests. The presence of MTBE was particularly observed in aquifers with substantial infiltration of surface waters, and in phreatic aquifers in urban areas. The study shows that in areas where surface water serves directly or indirectly (e.g. after bank filtration) as the drinking water resource, MTBE and ETBE levels may exceed the olfactory thresholds. The low odour and flavour thresholds combined with the high mobility and persistence of these compounds and their high and increasing use, can force drinking water companies to develop re-
moval steps in order to produce a drinking water quality that will be accepted by its consumers. Human health problems other than olfactory well-being are not expected since the ambient levels of MTBE and other oxygenates observed in water in this study are far below levels that can be toxic to humans.

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