

**GROUNDWATER INFORMATION SHEET**

**Benzene**

*The purpose of this groundwater information sheet is to provide general information regarding a specific constituent of concern (COC). The information provided herein relates to wells (groundwater sources) used for public drinking water, not water served at the tap.*

<b>GENERAL INFORMATION</b>	
<b>Constituent of Concern</b>	Benzene
<b>Aliases</b>	Annulene, Benzole, Phene, Phenyl hydride, Pyrobenzole, Cyclohexatriene
<b>Chemical Formula</b>	C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>6</sub>
<b>CAS No.</b>	71-43-2
<b>Storet No.</b>	34030
<b>Summary</b>	<p>Benzene is a regulated chemical with an established California State Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) in drinking water of 1 µg/L. Benzene is a colorless highly flammable liquid that evaporates quickly into air and dissolves slightly in water. It is found in crude oil and gasoline, but also occurs naturally in volcanic gases and smoke resulting from forest fires. Benzene is a known carcinogen both in humans and in laboratory animals. Based on a GeoTracker public well data from 2006 to 2016, there were 10 active and standby public wells (of 12,114 tested) that have one or more detections of benzene above the MCL.</p>

*Revised: March 2016*

**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Quality  
GAMA Program**

<b>REGULATORY AND WATER QUALITY LEVELS<sup>1</sup></b>		
<b>Type</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Concentration</b>
Federal MCL	US EPA <sup>2</sup>	5 µg/L
California State MCL	SWRCB-DDW <sup>3</sup>	1 µg/L
Detection Limit for Purposes of Reporting (DLR)	SWRCB-DDW	0.5 µg/L
Others:		
CA Public Health Goal (PHG)	OEHHA <sup>4</sup>	0.15 µg/L
Cancer Potency Factor (1/10 <sup>6</sup> cancer risk)	OEHHA	0.35 µg/L

<sup>1</sup>These levels generally relate to drinking water; other water quality levels may exist. For further information, see *A Compilation of Water Quality Goals* (Marshack, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> US EPA – United States Environmental Protection Agency

<sup>3</sup>SWRCB-DDW – State Water Resources Control Board, Division of Drinking Water

<sup>4</sup>OEHHA – Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment

<b>SUMMARY OF DETECTIONS IN PUBLIC WATER WELLS<sup>5</sup></b>	
<b>Detection Type</b>	<b>Number of Groundwater Sources</b>
Number of active and standby public water wells with benzene concentration <sup>6</sup> > 1µg/L	10 of 12,114 wells sampled
County with most active and standby public water wells where benzene concentration was >1 µg/L	King (4), no other county had more than one well with benzene above CA-MCL.

<sup>5</sup>Based on 2006-2016 public standby and active well (groundwater sources) data collected by the SWRCB-DDW.

<sup>6</sup> Groundwater from active and standby wells is typically treated to prevent exposure to chemical concentrations above the MCL. Data from private domestic wells and wells with less than 15 service connections are not available.

*Revised: March 2016*

**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Quality  
GAMA Program**

<b>ANALYTICAL INFORMATION</b>		
<b>Method</b>	<b>Detection Limit</b>	<b>Note</b>
<b>US EPA 502.2</b>	0.01 µg/L	Gas chromatography with photoionization and electrolytic conductivity detectors.
<b>US EPA 8260/524.2</b>	0.04 µg/L	Gas chromatography/mass spectrometry. US EPA Method 8260 is used at Leaking Underground Fuel Tank (LUFT) sites
<b>US EPA 8020</b>	0.2 µg/L	Gas chromatography with photo-ionization detector
<b>Known Limitations to Analytical Methods</b>	US EPA Method 8020 can detect benzene but may yield false positives when other volatile organic compounds are present and co-elute in the same chromatographic range. The presence of benzene should be confirmed by US EPA Method 524.2 or Method 8260 prior to use of Method 8020 for a long-term monitoring program.	
<b>Public Drinking Water Testing Requirements</b>	Benzene is a regulated chemical for drinking water sources, with monitoring and compliance requirements (Title 22, Section 64431, et seq.).	

<b>OCCURRENCE</b>	
<b>Anthropogenic Sources</b>	<p>Benzene is a naturally occurring chemical found mostly in crude oil and gasoline. Benzene in unleaded gasoline is typically around 1 percent of the total volume. By 2007, the worldwide annual demand for benzene was approximately 40 million tons. Most of it is used to produce styrene and cumene; chemicals used in the manufacturing of plastics, resins, adhesives and nylon. It is estimated that approximately 6 million tons of benzene was used annually in the USA in the 1990s.</p> <p>Benzene can be released to groundwater from leaking underground fuel storage tanks and piping, atmospheric deposition, fuel spills during transportation, and leaks at</p>

Revised: March 2016

**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Quality  
GAMA Program**

	refineries. Underground storage tanks or piping releases make up the majority of the releases that have impacted groundwater. Studies have shown that atmospheric deposition of benzene results only in trace concentrations in surface waters. In contrast, point sources of benzene contamination such as underground storage tank sites may result in benzene concentrations in the milligrams per liter (mg/L) range.
<b>Natural Sources</b>	Benzene occurs naturally in the environment as a product of incomplete combustion of carbon-rich materials. Benzene is also present in petroleum oil deposits and in gases associated with volcanic eruptions and forest fires.
<b>History of Occurrence</b>	Benzene replaced lead as a gasoline additive for its anti-knock properties. Concerns about negative health effects related to air quality led to the limitation of benzene content in gasoline to about 1 percent. US EPA regulations had further lowered the benzene content to 0.62 percent in 2011. Based on a SWRCB data query in March 2016 using GeoTracker GAMA, 26 active and standby public water wells out of approximately 13,000 sampled have benzene detections above the State MCL at least once since 1984. The maximum measured concentration was 180 µg/L.
<b>Contaminant Transport Characteristics</b>	Benzene can volatilize into air from soil and water. Once in the atmosphere, benzene breaks down (biodegrades) within a few days. In soil and groundwater, the biodegradation process is slower. Benzene is slightly soluble in water and can migrate through the soil column into groundwater. Because benzene is a light non-aqueous phase liquid (LNAPL) it can collect on top of the water table. Benzene biodegradation in groundwater can take days to years, depending on oxygen concentration, temperature, and the presence of favorable bacteria.

Revised: March 2016

## REMEDICATION & TREATMENT TECHNOLOGIES

Several effective remediation technologies remove benzene and other gasoline compounds from soil and groundwater. These include:

**Soil Vapor Extraction (SVE)** – Effective in reducing benzene in the unsaturated zone due to the high vapor pressure.

**Air Sparging** – Used in conjunction with soil vapor extraction. This can also oxygenate the groundwater and stimulate biodegradation of dissolved contaminants.

**In-situ Oxidation** – Relies on the capacity of certain chemicals (e.g. hydrogen peroxide combined with iron) to rapidly oxidize organic molecules in water.

**Bioremediation** – Most effective under aerobic conditions.

**Flushing (Pump and Treat)** – Extracts contaminated groundwater and treats at the surface using air stripping, activated carbon, or advanced oxidation systems.

For drinking water, the most common treatment options are air stripping, activated carbon filters, and advanced oxidation (combinations of ultraviolet light, chemical oxidants, and catalysts).

There are other emerging technologies for the remediation and treatment of benzene and gasoline compounds including permeable reactive barriers and thermal treatment.

## HEALTH EFFECT INFORMATION

Exposure to benzene can occur through the lungs (inhalation), gastrointestinal tract (ingestion), and through skin (dermal contact). Health effects depend on two main factors: length of exposure and concentration (amount of benzene a person is exposed to).

Brief exposure to very high levels of benzene in air can result in death, while breathing lower levels can cause drowsiness, confusion, dizziness, headaches, tremors and unconsciousness. The major effect of benzene exposure is to the blood. Long term exposure to benzene can affect the body's ability to produce red blood cells. When the bone marrow is affected, the result is usually a form of leukemia. It can also cause blood (hematologic) diseases, anemia, and cancers of blood-forming organs. The most common long-term health effects associated with benzene exposure are:

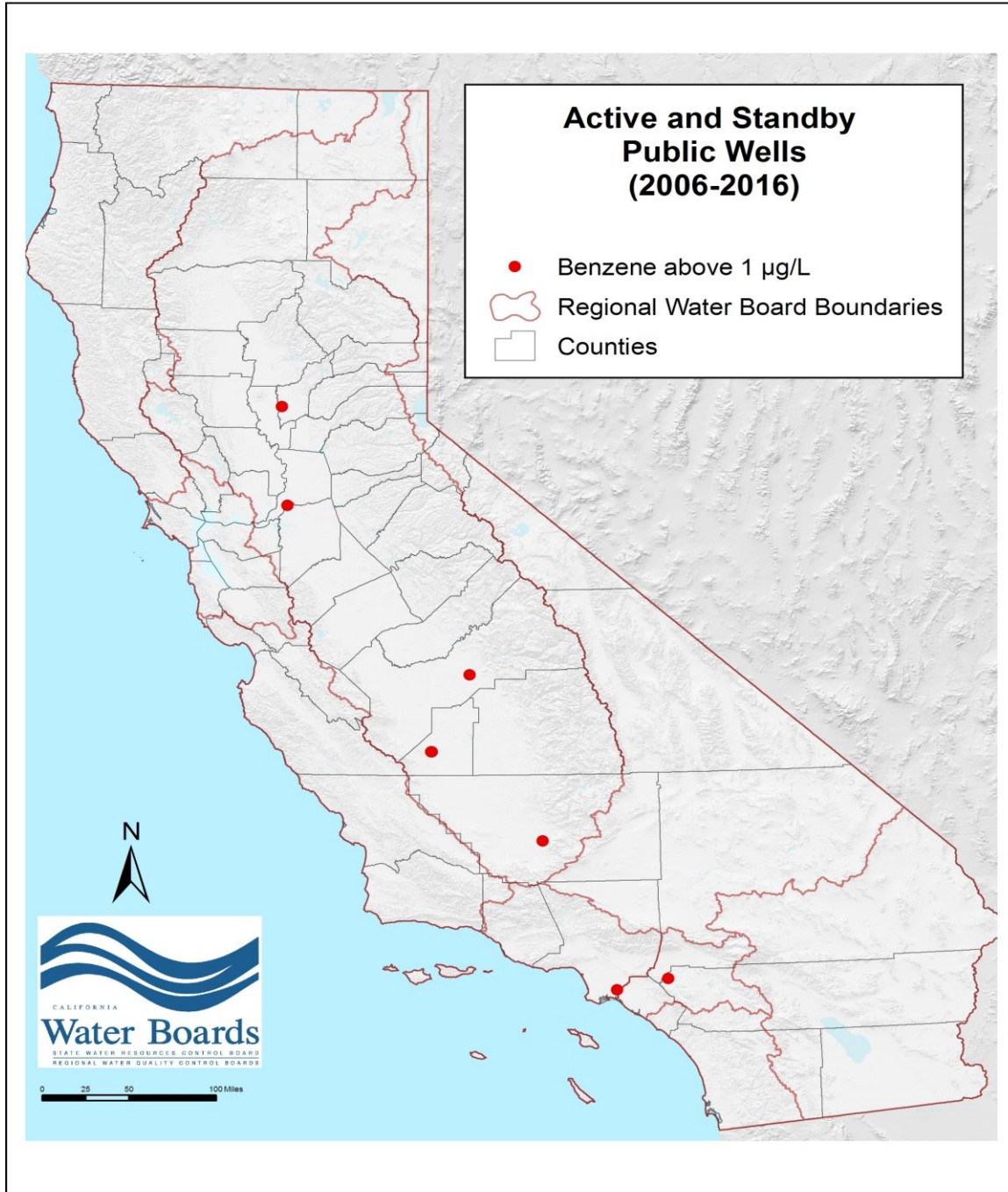
- Acute Myelogenous Leukemia (AML) in which cancer cells are present in the blood and bone marrow.
- Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia (ALL) in which the cancer affects the cells that make the lymphocytes for the bone marrow.
- Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML) in which the leukemia develops from the white blood cells reducing the body's ability to fight disease and infection.

**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Quality  
GAMA Program**

**Key References**

1. California State Water Resources Control Board, *A Compilation of Water Quality Goals*. Prepared by Jon B. Marshack  
[http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water\\_issues/programs/water\\_quality\\_goals/index.shtml](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/water_quality_goals/index.shtml)
2. Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment-California Environmental Protection Agency Public Health Goal for BENZENE In Drinking Water  
<http://www.oehha.ca.gov/water/phg/pdf/BenzeneFinPHG.pdf>
3. State Water Resources Control Board, California Drinking Water-Related Laws  
[http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking\\_water/certlic/drinkingwater/Lawbook.shtml](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/Lawbook.shtml)
4. State Water Resources Control Board, GeoTracker GAMA Online Database  
[http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water\\_issues/programs/gama/geotracker\\_gama.shtml](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/gama/geotracker_gama.shtml)
5. US Environmental Protection Agency, Technologies-Remediation, <http://www.clu-in.org/remediation/>
6. US Environmental Protection Agency. 2016. Water, Benzene Health Advisory, <http://yosemite.epa.gov/water/owrccatalog.nsf/7322259e90d060c885256f0a0055db68/8978cf75ee38f27785256b06007231a8!opendocument>

**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Quality  
GAMA Program**



Active and Standby Public Wells with at least one detection of Benzene above the 1 µg/L MCL (10 wells). Source: Public Well Data using GeoTracker GAMA.

Revised: March 2016