

# BUSINESS

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## Petroleum industry funds challenge to benzene study

Group collects \$27M for competing study of chemical's effects

BY WENDY BENJAMINSON  
*Associated Press*

HOUSTON — The American Petroleum Institute collected more than \$27 million from oil companies to challenge a National Cancer Institute study that suggests occupational exposure to benzene is more dangerous than previously believed.

The industry effort, according to documents found in boxes of evidence in an unrelated lawsuit, was undertaken to give the industry leverage against any consequences of the study, such as tighter regulations or lawsuits from cancer patients. Benzene, long known to be carcinogenic,

is a chemical used throughout the petroleum industry. It is a widespread contaminant in the air and groundwater and comes from industrial sources, cigarette smoke, gasoline and automobile emissions. While it is generally accepted that benzene causes leukemia, scientists argue about the level of risk at low exposures as well as the other blood-related diseases that could be contracted from benzene. The U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration has a permissible exposure limit for people who work with benzene of 1 part per million in eight hours.

The documents were found in boxes of evidence that Marathon Oil Co. provided to Houston lawyer Lance Lubel, who is suing Dow Chemical Co. on behalf of a worker who now has leukemia. Lubel deposed Dr. Gerhard Raabe, who

led the petroleum institute's Health and Products Stewardship Committee. Raabe was trying to raise money from oil companies for the American Petroleum Institute study.

In the deposition, Raabe said he was concerned about the soundness of the cancer institute's study and that "folks like you," — meaning plaintiffs' lawyers — would continue to believe benzene had health effects for which he said there was little scientific evidence.

Asked what benefit to the industry the study would have, Raabe replied: "Well, you may have noticed, but indirectly there are subparties in litigation. Every time somebody regulates benzene, it has an impact on gasoline production. ... Does it make sense to keep benzene — benzene levels in gasoline at 1 percent, which is where they are

now in this country? ... It costs money to control the benzene content to these levels. You know, is that money well spent? Are there better things to do with the ... resources."

The 1997 National Cancer Institute study of workers in Shanghai, China, where benzene exposure is far higher than in the United States, concluded that workers with 10 or more years of benzene exposure had a risk of developing non-Hodgkins' lymphoma more than four times that of the general population.

Another National Cancer Institute study of benzene on Chinese workers, published in the journal *Science* in December, concluded that "these data provide evidence that benzene causes hematologic effects (diseases of the blood) at or below 1 ppm, particularly among susceptible sub-populations."