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CTV News with Lloyd Robertson

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Oil Spill

CTV News Staff

Marion Tobin has been watching her front yard disappear, one shovel and one truckload at a time.

Her family's dream home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia is now the centre of an intensive environmental cleanup.

When the Tobins woke up on January 24, 2002, the smell of oil was heavy in the air. The last thing Tobin suspected was a leak in her oil tank in the backyard. The tank, only six years old, was supposed to last 15 years.

"You could hardly breathe. It was just like somebody had come and dumped oil in the house. And so I went around and we turned off the oil stove immediately and my husband left for work. And I went and checked the lines with a paper towel, just in case there's any drips or whatever because I know that a small amount of oil can make a big smell. But there was nothing, nothing at all."

Marion Tobin then discovered it was the almost new heating oil tank in the backyard. The culprit was a small hole in the oil tank, caused by corrosion.

In a matter of hours environment officials swarmed her property, backhoes moved in and begin carting away the yard. The Tobin family life was turned upside down. Then they discovered it wasn't just the yard that was going to be ripped up.

"Oh no, it's not going to stop at the yard. They're going to come in next week... They have to dig out the floor and gut part of the basement, so far. We don't know how far that's going to take us. I mean right now it's half the basement that's going to be gone and that was just newly done and painted and new carpeting. So we have to move out," says Tobin.

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The Tobins aren't alone. There are estimates of as many as 7,000 oil spills a year. But it's the cost to homeowners and to insurance companies that is truly astronomical. Clean ups can easily run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"It's costing all of us, whether or not it's paid for by the insurance industry or by individual consumers. It's all costing us as consumers tens of millions of dollars a year," says Don Forgeron with the Insurance Bureau of Canada.

Millions of dollars are spent cleaning up after spills because of corrosion, breaks in fuel lines or tanks tipping over when they are being filled. And almost all spills are preventable.

Oil fuels tanks heat more than one and a half million homes in Canada. Many of those tanks, installed in the sixties and seventies, are long overdue to be replaced. This is one of the reasons experts say more spills are happening.

Pinprick corrosion or small breaks in the fuel line can go undetected for months. Homeowners could have a disaster on their hands before they even know they've sprung a leak.

That's what happened to Laurie Carruthers. A broken fuel line caused a leak she didn't suspect until oil showed up in her water.

"I went to get a drink of water and tasted oil in the water. And my friend said, 'I think your biggest nightmare came true.' So we went outside, looked at the line and it was broken. So obviously there's oil onto the property. At this point it got up into the well."

When an average tank springs a leak, it can spill 900 litres of oil. Just one litre of spilled oil can contaminate one million litres of drinking water. For Carruthers, who runs a vacation cottage business in Stanley Bridge, P.E.I., oil in the groundwater could have spelled disaster.

"If it gets into the neighbours' [water supply], then they sue my business. So I would have been in big trouble. I thought I was going to go bankrupt. I thought I'd lose my whole business."

These days, Carruthers carefully inspects her tank and is thankful that she got off lightly. The clean up and a new well only cost \$10,000.

There are thousand of spills and millions of dollars are spent on clean up. Health risks range from irritation of the eyes and nose to liver or lung damage. But despite the risks, there are few laws in Canada governing tanks.

Only in the last year have Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland

Labrador brought in rules. But the rules aren't tough - in Ontario tanks are inspected every ten years. In P.E.I. and Newfoundland the tank gets one inspection and is given a best before date to show when it has to be replaced.

Stephen Armstrong from Dalhousie University says government attempts to decide the life expectancy of a tank are more of a gamble than a science.

But the P.E.I. environment minister, Chester Gillan, is confident inspections will do the trick.

"People want to protect the environment and they want to protect themselves. They feel that this gives them a big degree of protection that they didn't have in the past. And a step at a time, I'm very satisfied with what we have done."

But other experts say inspections aren't enough. Elson Fernandes has been in the tank industry for over 30 years and is on a committee to set tank manufacturing standards.

"Inspection doesn't tell you anything about the inside of the tank. So how can they say that I'll inspect it today and it'll last ten years if they haven't done an internal inspection? And they don't do it because it's simply not feasible unless you empty the tank, clean it out and everything else."

Fernandes says the real solution is to mandate leak-proof tanks. But these tanks cost can \$2,000 to \$3,000 rather than the \$500 or \$600 paid for ordinary tanks.

Provincial governments, and even the insurance industry, with payouts of \$11.5-million last year in Atlantic Canada alone, say homeowners can't be expected to pay for an invincible tank.

But in Europe they are expected to pay. Germany requires virtually spill proof, double walled tanks or tanks enclosed in leak proof rooms. Homeowners in

England need to pass a risk assessment to decide what kind of tank they're allowed. The tough European laws have been around for 30 years and spills have been all but eliminated.

It's of little consolation to Bill Hyndman as he walks through the stripped down shell of his home in Belleville, Ontario. After having his furniture, carpets, even ceilings torn out, the empty rooms are a painful reminder of the day he can never forget.

"I had a call on my cell phone. I should return home. There's something wrong with the house. It's the oil company, the fuel delivery company calling me."

A spill occurred when the fuel delivery company was filling the Hyndman's home oil tank in their basement; it was the beginning of their nightmare.

The Hyndman oil tank tipped over when the feet of the tank gave way, even though Hyndman had the tank and its base inspected and approved by an oil mechanic just 10 months earlier.

In a matter of minutes Bill and Susan Hyndman's picture perfect family home was a black oily mess.

"We put our heart and soul into that house. It was our first house we bought. And we were planning on staying there," says Susan Hyndman.

A sigh of relief came for the Hyndmans after a call to their insurance company confirmed coverage for the cleanup. But their nightmare was far from over.

"They tore the house apart. They replaced the basement floor twice. There's no basement in it right now; there's no heating system in it right now; there's no plumbing in it right now. So much money you have to put back into the house," says Bill Hyndman.

In the days before the spill home videos recorded memories of the happy home where the Hyndman's two little girls planned to grow up. But later the back yard is torn up with puddles two metres deep of oily liquid and the house is in shambles.

"After I guess about a month and a half later they said 'It's all cleaned up. You just have to do some renovations and you'll be back in your house probably by early spring.' And then that's when Bill hired the third party to do the testing to see if it was safe to go back," says Susan Hyndman.

The engineering report confirmed their fears. There was still oil, 210 times the safe level, in, under and around the house. Hyndman wasn't prepared to risk the health of his family. But the insurance company wouldn't budge. The house, it said, was clean and safe to live in.

Refusing to move back into their home the family bounced from hotel to hotel, something their two daughters found especially hard.

"The fact that they left everything behind, all their toys, everything. The first few months they probably nightly they used to cry to go home. That part was pretty tough," says Susan Hyndman.

Finally Bill Hyndman cashed in his savings to buy a second house rather than risk the health of his family.

Their old house, once appraised at \$180,000, is now worth just \$60,000. But Hyndman isn't even sure he could sell it for that.

"Even if they did fix it, it's to the point where there's so much stigma attached to the house. It's always going to be the oil spill house and we don't want to be associated with that."

The Hyndman's story doesn't come as any surprise to Doug LeBlanc. He's an environmental contractor. His specialized equipment checks and purifies ground water. He spends most of his time cleaning up a clean up gone wrong. In Markham, Ontario and at hundreds of other sites each year, he found oil after the first clean up crew said the job was done.

LeBlanc says too many contractors, as high as 80 per cent, do the job without the proper

equipment or the proper know-how.

"A lot of them are good people, have a lot of morals. I believe they are reading the wrong guidelines."

Crews in LeBlanc's company clean up sites to pristine condition - zero oil in the ground water and "non detect" in the soil. But some government guidelines allow small amounts of oil left in the soil, about 100 parts per million. LeBlanc says many clean up jobs leave levels much higher, as high as 800 times that level.

"Some of the spills I've responded to, they've put down a white powder that is meant for small spills on concrete. They put lemon freshener; they put Pine Sol; they put vinegar or they put cinnamon," says LeBlanc.

If a clean up doesn't get all the oil dangerous hydrocarbons, the airborne particles from oil, are left behind. Toxicologist Bob Willes knows what happens when people touch and breath hydrocarbons.

"Things like skin rashes, eye rashes, problems with eye infections. Those types of things are secondary to irritations. Then you can start getting into damage to certain types of organs like liver damage, lung damage. The very long-term exposures, which require usually years, are cancer effects like leukemia or skin cancer."

Carpets, walls, windows, and furniture, even cracks in the ceilings and floors, can hold traces of dangerous materials a shoddy clean up leaves behind.

At one insurance company, concerned about skyrocketing costs for oil spill cleanups, there's a push to set a benchmark for companies hired for cleanups.

According to Bob Brenner, with Farm Mutual Reinsurance Plan Incorporated, it's an attempt to avoid the escalating costs of redoing a bad job.




"What we found first of all is that there are really no qualifications required in the various provinces, with the exception of one province in their legislation, for being an environmental contractor."

Brenner says insurance companies don't want to hire crews that do a shoddy job. He says the problem is there aren't enough qualified crews for the number of spills.

The Hyndman clean up is now estimated at almost \$900,000 and is expected to hit \$1,000,000. Plus, the Hyndmans got another bill for \$300. It's for the oil that delivered that fateful day.

"It's a nightmare. We're talking about 300 bucks worth of oil. It's crazy," says Hyndman.

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