



A pioneer in cleaning up toxic messes, Thomas Schruben long suspected major oil companies of being paid twice for dealing with leaks from underground fuel storage tanks - once from government funds and again, secretly, from insurance companies.

Schruben, a detail-oriented Maryland environmental engineer who helped draft government pollution rules going back 30 years, looked for a lawyer to help ferret out what he believed could in some cases be fraud. He found a partner in Dennis Pantazis, a buoyant, mustachioed son of Greek immigrants in Alabama known for bringing environmental and civil rights cases.

"Together we started unraveling the mystery," Schruben said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Schruben's former employer, has called the rusted, leaky steel tanks the single largest threat to groundwater in the United States. Often built for gas stations during the 1950s and '60s highway construction boom, the tanks corroded over time, spilling gas and diesel with potentially cancer-causing chemicals under properties and into aquifers.

The two men assembled a team of lawyers, investigators and experts to search public records and case files for evidence and brought their findings to state governments, hoping to be hired as advisers or legal counsel. New Mexico paid more than \$1 million in attorney fees after one \$5.2 million settlement from Chevron last September.

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