



# A Citizen's Guide to Natural Attenuation

Technology Innovation Office

Technology Fact Sheet

## What is natural attenuation?

Natural attenuation makes use of natural processes to contain the spread of contamination from chemical spills and reduce the concentration and amount of pollutants at contaminated sites. Natural attenuation—also referred to as *intrinsic remediation*, *bioattenuation*, or *intrinsic bioremediation*—is an *in situ* treatment method. This means that environmental contaminants are left in place while natural attenuation works on them. Natural attenuation is often used as one part of a site cleanup that also includes the control or removal of the source of the contamination.

## How does natural attenuation work?

The processes contributing to natural attenuation are typically acting at many sites, but at varying rates and degrees of effectiveness, depending on the types of contaminants present, and the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the soil and ground water. Natural attenuation processes are often categorized as *destructive* or *non-destructive*. Destructive processes destroy the contaminant. Non-destructive processes do not destroy the contaminant but cause a reduction in contaminant concentrations.

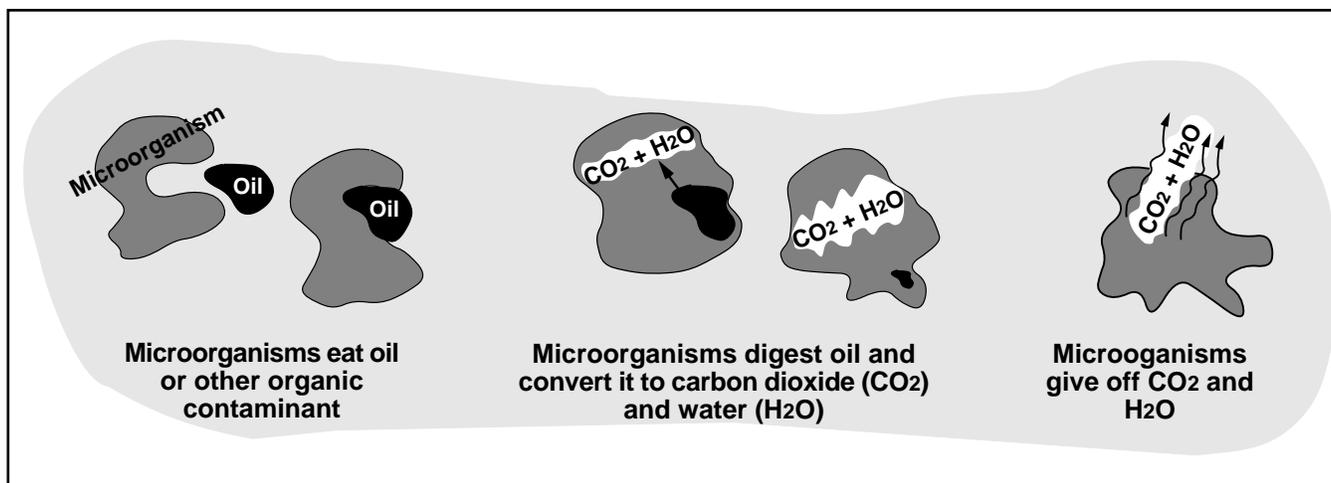
Natural attenuation processes may reduce contaminant mass (through destructive processes such as **biodegradation** and chemical transformations); reduce contaminant concentrations (through simple **dilution** or **dispersion**); or bind contaminants to soil particles so the contamination does not spread or migrate very far (**adsorption**).

**Biodegradation**, also called bioremediation, is a process in which naturally occurring microorganisms (yeast, fungi, or bacteria) break down, or *degrade*, hazardous substances into less toxic or nontoxic substances. Microorganisms, like humans, eat and digest organic substances for nutrition and energy. (In chemical terms, “organic” compounds are those that contain carbon and hydrogen atoms.) Certain microorganisms can digest organic substances such as fuels or solvents that are hazardous to humans. Biodegradation can occur in the presence of oxygen (aerobic conditions) or without oxygen (anaerobic conditions). In most subsurface environments, both aerobic and anaerobic biodegradation of contaminants occur. The microorganisms break down the organic contaminants into harmless products—mainly carbon dioxide and water in the case of aerobic biodegradation (Figure 1). Once the contaminants are degraded, the

### A Quick Look at Natural Attenuation

- Uses naturally occurring environmental processes to clean up sites.
- Is non-invasive and allows the site to be put to productive use while being cleaned up.
- Requires careful study of site conditions and monitoring of contaminant levels.

Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Aerobic Biodegradation in Soil



microorganism populations decline because they have used their food sources. Dead microorganisms or small populations in the absence of food pose no contamination risk. The fact sheet entitled *A Citizen's Guide to Bioremediation* describes the process in detail (see page 4).

Many organic contaminants, like petroleum, can be biodegraded by microorganisms in the underground environment. For example, biodegradation processes can effectively cleanse soil and ground water of hydrocarbon fuels such as gasoline and the BTEX compounds—benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes. Biodegradation also can break down chlorinated solvents, like trichloroethylene (TCE), in ground water but the processes involved are harder to predict and are effective at a smaller percentage of sites compared to petroleum-contaminated sites. Chlorinated solvents, widely used for degreasing aircraft engines, automobile parts, and electronic components, are among the most often-found organic ground-water contaminants. When chlorinated compounds are biodegraded, it is important that the degradation be complete, because some products of the breakdown process can be more toxic than the original compounds.

The effects of **dilution** and **dispersion** appear to reduce contaminant concentration but do not destroy the contaminant. Relatively clean water from the ground surface can seep underground to mix with and dilute contaminated ground water. Clean ground water from an underground location flowing into

contaminated areas, or the dispersion of pollutants as they spreading out away from the main path of the contaminated plume also lead to a reduced concentration of the contaminant in a given area.

**Adsorption** occurs when contaminants attach or *sorb* to underground particles. Fuel hydrocarbons tend to repel water, as most oily substances do. When they have an opportunity to escape from the ground water by attaching to organic matter and clay minerals that also repel water, they do so. This is beneficial because it may keep the contaminants from flowing to an area where they might be a health threat. Sorption, like dilution and dispersion, appears to reduce the concentration and mass of contamination in the ground water, but does not destroy the contaminants.

### Why consider natural attenuation?

In certain situations, natural attenuation is an effective, inexpensive cleanup option and the most appropriate way to remediate some contamination problems. Natural attenuation is sometimes mislabeled as a “no action” approach. However, natural attenuation is really a proactive approach that focuses on the confirmation and monitoring of natural remediation processes rather than relying totally on “engineered” technologies. Mobile and toxic fuel hydrocarbons, for example, are good candidates for natural attenuation. Not only are they difficult to trap because of their mobility, but they are also among the contaminants most easily destroyed by biodegradation. Natural attenuation is non-invasive, and, un-

like many elaborate mechanical site cleanup techniques, while natural attenuation is working below ground, the land surface above ground may continue to be used. Natural attenuation can be less costly than other active engineered treatment options, especially those available for ground water, and requires no energy source or special equipment.

### **Will natural attenuation work at every site?**

To estimate how well natural attenuation will work and how long it will take requires a detailed study of the contaminated site. The community and those conducting the cleanup need to know whether natural attenuation, or any proposed remedy, will reduce the contaminant concentrations in the soil and water to legally acceptable levels within a reasonable time.

Natural attenuation may be an acceptable option for sites that have been through some active remediation which has reduced the concentrations of contaminants. However, natural attenuation is not an appropriate option at all sites. The rates of natural processes are typically slow. Long-term monitoring is necessary to demonstrate that contaminant concentrations are continually decreasing at a rate sufficient to ensure that they will not become a health threat. If not, more aggressive remedial alternatives should be considered.

### **What Is An Innovative Treatment Technology?**

*Treatment technologies* are processes applied to the treatment of hazardous waste or contaminated materials to permanently alter their condition through chemical, biological, or physical means.

*Innovative treatment technologies* are those that have been tested, selected or used for treatment of hazardous waste or contaminated materials but lack well-documented cost and performance data under a variety of operating conditions.

Because the ability of natural attenuation to be an effective cleanup method depends on a variety of conditions, the site needs to be well-characterized to determine if natural attenuation is occurring or will occur. Sites where the soil contains high levels of natural organic matter, such as swampy areas or former marshlands often provide successful conditions for natural attenuation. Certain geological formations such as fractured bedrock aquifers or limestone areas are less likely candidates for natural attenuation because these environments often have a wide variety of soil types that cause unpredictable ground water flow and make predicting the movement of contamination difficult.

### **Where is natural attenuation being used?**

Natural attenuation is being used to clean up petroleum contamination from leaking underground storage tanks across the country.

Within the Superfund program, natural attenuation has been selected as one of the cleanup methods at 73 ground-water-contaminated sites—but is the sole treatment option at only six of these sites. Some of these sites include municipal and industrial land fills, refineries, and recyclers.

At the Allied Signal Brake Systems Superfund site in St. Joseph, Michigan, microorganisms are effectively removing TCE and other chlorinated solvents from ground water. Scientists studied the underground movement of TCE-contaminated ground water from its origin at the Superfund site to where it entered Lake Michigan about half a mile away. At the site itself, they measured TCE concentrations greater than 200,000 micrograms per liter ( $\mu\text{g/L}$ ), but by the time the plume reached the shore of Lake Michigan, the TCE was one thousand times less—only 200  $\mu\text{g/L}$ . About 300 feet offshore in Lake Michigan, the concentrations were below EPA's allowable levels. EPA estimated the plume took about 20 years to move from the source of contamination to Lake Michigan—plenty of time for the microorganisms naturally present in the ground water to destroy the TCE without any outside intervention. In fact, microorganisms were destroying about 600 pounds of TCE a year at no cost to taxpayers. EPA determined that nature adequately remediated the TCE plume in St. Joseph.

## For More Information

The publications listed below can be ordered free of charge by faxing your request to NCEPI at 513-489-8695. If NCEPI is out of stock of a document, you may be directed to other sources. Some of the documents listed also can be downloaded free of charge from EPA's Cleanup Information (CLU-IN) World Wide Web site (<http://clu-in.com>) or electronic bulletin board (301-589-8366). The CLU-IN help line number is 301-589-8368.

You may write to NCEPI at:

National Center for Environmental Publications and Information (NCEPI)  
P.O. Box 42419  
Cincinnati, OH 45242

- *A Citizen's Guide to Bioremediation*, April 1996, EPA 542-F-96-007.
- *Symposium on Intrinsic Bioremediation of Ground Water*, August 1994, EPA 540-R-94-515.
- *Bioremediation Research: Producing Low-Cost Tools to Reclaim Environments*, September 1995, EPA 540-R-95-523a.
- "Natural Bioremediation of TCE," *Ground Water Currents* (newsletter), September 1993, EPA 542-N-93-008.
- "Innovative Measures Distinguish Natural Bioattenuation from Dilution/Sorption," *Ground Water Currents* (newsletter), December 1992, EPA 542-N-92-006.
- *How to Evaluate Alternative Cleanup Technologies for UST Sites*, (Chapter on Natural Attenuation), May 1995, EPA 510-B-95-007.
- *Bioremediation Resource Guide*, September 1993, EPA 542-B-93-004. **A bibliography of publications and other sources of information about bioremediation technologies.**
- *Engineering Bulletin: In Situ Biodegradation Treatment*, April 1994, EPA 540-S-94-502.
- *Selected Alternative and Innovative Treatment Technologies for Corrective Action and Site Remediation: A Bibliography of EPA Information Sources*, January 1995, EPA 542-B-95-001. **A bibliography of EPA publications about innovative treatment technologies.**
- *WASTECH® Monograph on Bioremediation*, ISBN #1-883767-01-6. Available for \$49.95 from the American Academy of Environmental Engineers, 130 Holiday Court, Annapolis, MD 21401. Telephone 410-266-3311.

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