

Post Dispatch 4/8/77

State Says Ellisville Firm Polluted Meramec Tributary With PCBs

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A waste-oil firm based in Ellisville has been accused by the state of depositing waste contaminated with an extremely hazardous chemical in an earthen pit adjoining a tributary of the Meramec River in Jefferson County.

Some of the waste seeped into the stream and killed some fish and crawfish, state officials say. The wastes are polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs. One of the state's complaints is that it doesn't know where the waste is now.

Russell Bliss, owner of Bliss Salvage Oil Co., was named as the defendant in a suit filed yesterday in Jefferson County Circuit Court by Dan R. Summers, an assistant attorney general. Plaintiffs are the state, the Department of Natural Resources and the Clean Water Commission.

The suit seeks an injunction against transportation of the wastes and penalties of \$10,000 for each day the wastes were kept at the pit or allowed to seep into the stream.

One state official said the situation had presented a "real, real chance of a lot of injury."

PCBs have been used since 1929 in electrical transformers and capacitors, in lubricants, in waterproofing chemicals and in "carbonless" duplicating paper. The only domestic producer of the chemicals is the Monsanto Co. of St. Louis. But Monsanto has said it will stop producing PCBs by Oct. 31 because of

the risk they pose.

Although some pollutants are more toxic than PCBs, few are more resistant to breakdown by natural forces. Traces of PCBs have been found in fish in many of the country's watersheds; they are known to cause skin disease and liver disturbances.

The state's suit alleges that agents or employees of Bliss deposited liquid, semi-liquid and solid wastes in a pit on property owned by Al Harris, just off Calvey Creek Road near Cedar Hill, about 30 miles southwest of St. Louis. The dumping began on Feb. 18; the state became aware of it on March 25 after neighbors complained of foul odors.

Several days later, Bliss arranged for the removal of the wastes. The state says in its petition that it has been unable to find those wastes. The state says Bliss has given the Department of Natural Resources conflicting reports about their whereabouts.

"The inability to locate the wastes at the moment presents a serious health hazard and a public nuisance," a state official said.

Preliminary tests on residue in the pit indicated the presence of several toxic chemicals besides PCBs. Tests on the water in the creek, a nameless offshoot of Calvey Creek, have not been completed. Calvey Creek flows into the Meramec River about 10 miles from the disposal site.

Several weeks ago, the Cedar Hill Fire Department extinguished a fire at the site. Jefferson County Fire Marshall

Calvin Woodard said the fire had been set by the owner of the property, Harris.

"He was running a salvage operation by fire," Woodard said. "It was the first and only time that he will do that." Harris is not cited in the state's suit.

Bliss refused to comment on the state's allegations. The company's office is on Strecker Road in Ellisville.

Bliss picks up waste oil from about 1800 customers in the St. Louis area, most of them service stations and trucking companies.

Bliss was involved in a well-publicized mishap in 1971 involving the disposal of some hazardous wastes containing a toxic chemical known as dioxin. Waste oil containing dioxin was sprayed at three riding stables in central and western Missouri by a driver for Bliss; the aim was to control dust.

Within weeks, however, the chemical had killed 67 horses, thousands of birds and a dozen cats and had sickened 10 persons.

In 1974, the cause of the trouble was discovered by scientists at the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. In addition, heavy residues of PCBs were found in soil samples from the arena at the time. Bliss was hauling annually about 10,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated wastes from a transformer company, he told scientists in Atlanta.

A hearing on the state's petition for a temporary injunction has been set for 9 a.m. Tuesday in the courtroom of Circuit Judge Charles Sheehan.