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7 N.C. Agencies Want To Know Who Spilled Hazardous Chemical

Observer Staff And Wire Reports

RALEIGH — Angry state officials announced Wednesday that at least seven state agencies are trying to find out how a cancer-causing chemical was spilled along 70 or more miles of Eastern North Carolina highways.

Natural Resources Secretary Howard Lee said the chemical — polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), used mostly to insulate electrical transformers — apparently was dumped deliberately.

Calling it "an outrageous act," Lee said state officials would announce today a large reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the spills.

Natural Resources Department spokesman Steve Meehan said officials also are trying to figure out how serious a health hazard the several thousand gallons of chemical pose and might ask the federal Environmental Protection Agency for advice. He said state officials are working in two, eight-hour shifts to find out how much chemical is concentrated in the ground and to decide whether contaminated soil should be removed.

"It could be right costly if we have to start removing dirt," Meehan said.

A highway patrol trooper apparently discovered the first spill July 27, noticing burned grass and an oily substance beside a highway. Most spills have been found in the past week in Franklin, Moore, Chatham, Harnett and Alamance counties. Officials are checking reports of spills in other areas.

Lee said several state agencies — the Highway Patrol, attorney general's office, State Bureau of Investigation and departments of agriculture, natural resources and community development, transportation and human resources — are investigating.

Robert Carter, state chief of water quality operations, said PCB is a "very dangerous chemical."

However, Dr. Martin Hines, state director of epidemiology, said people living along the contaminated highways probably won't have an immediate reaction to exposure to PCB because effects usually are long-term and build up from eating or drinking the substance. Laboratory tests have shown rats develop cancer after ingesting PCB.

Hines said residents should report any apparent reactions to health officials. He said public health nurses and hospitals have been alerted.

Hines said officials are monitoring wells, water supplies, cattle, crops and the air in the spill areas.