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N.C. set to dig up roadsides

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) – North Carolina will dig up more than 200 miles of rural roadside contaminated by a chemical containing toxic PCBs at a cost of as much as $6.5 million.

The excavation, and a search for a suitable site to permanently deposit the estimated 32,000 tons of tainted grass and soil, were announced Thursday by Gov. Jim Hunt as the state's latest reaction to the mysterious spill found in 15 eastern and Piedmont North Carolina counties this month.

Hunt, calling the apparently deliberate spill a "dastardly act," also said county health officials will hand-deliver printed notices on the dangers of prolonged exposure to PCB, polychlorinated biphenyls, to all residents of contaminated areas.

Signs will go up around all affected areas warning people to stay off the damaged soil until it is removed. But Hunt also repeated that health officials don't think the toxic material, dumped in violation of strict federal regulations on hazardous chemicals, poses an immediate medical threat.

"We do not, of course, know the long-term effects of PCBs on humans. That is why we must remove this material to protected and isolated sites," Hunt said.

The PCB has been traced to a type manufactured in the late 1960s by Monsanto Chemical Corp.

Health officials say PCBs, suspected as a possible cancer-causing agent when administered to laboratory animals in large doses, build up in human body tissues and may cause long-term health problems.

Environmental Protection Agency enforcement director Paul J. Traina, here to help in the investigation into the massive spill, said power companies are primary users of the substance but that they commonly have contracts with others for maintenance, hauling and disposal of PCBs.

The spills were discovered on back roads earlier this month. Officials have speculated the oily substance may have been dumped by someone seeking to avoid the cost of complying with new federal regulations.

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