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File

9 agents hunting for PCB culprits

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The state has headed up its investigation to find out who spilled toxic chemicals along 230 miles of state roads while environmental officials grapple with the cleanup problem.

The State Bureau of Investigation, which started with four investigators on the case, now has nine investigators assigned full time to the search for the origin of the polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, sprayed along the shoulder of highways in 15 counties.

Meanwhile, top environmental and health officials will make recommendations to Gov. Jim Hunt, who will make the final decision on whether to dig up the earth along the roadside for disposal at yet unselected sites.

Three people living along roads where there have been spills have complained about headaches and burning eyes, but medical officials said that probably was from a solvent containing PCBs. The solvent, a chlorobenzene, gives off a moth-ball-like smell.

State officials say the problems should disappear within a few days with no long-term effects, but recommend anyone suffering symptoms in the contaminated areas consult a doctor.

After Hunt was briefed Tuesday there was speculation the removal of the contaminated earth is inevitable.

Map showing spill areas, Page 2A.

Explanation of what PCB will do to the body, Page 6C.

"It's looking more and more like we're going to have to dig it up," said Steve Meehan, a spokesman for the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development.

Hunt has a news conference scheduled Thursday and is expected to announce the decision then.

The spill nearest Charlotte was northwest of Sanford, about 100 miles east of here. All the spills have occurred since Aug. 1.

A tanker was seen dumping Tuesday along U.S. 70 near New Bern but it turned out to be a false alarm when it was determined the substance was water.

"The volume of information coming in and the potential leads that have developed necessitated the beefing up (of investigators)," said SBI Agent Dan Gilbert.

"We've had a considerable number of calls from citizens throughout the state who are very much concerned."

The SBI has requested anyone with information about the spills to call its 24-hour line at 919-778-1400 or its toll free number at 1-800-662-7810. A \$2,500 reward has been posted by the state for information.

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State beefs up PCB spill probe

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mation leading to the arrest and conviction of the culprits.

Gilbert, who declined to estimate how many calls have been received, said they range from offering "very general information to some cases with very exacting and specific information."

Assisting the SBI, said Gilbert, are four federal investigators with the Environmental Protection Agency.

Speculation is the dumping might have been done by someone with a large volume of PCBs who became fearful of EPA regulations, some issued in April and some under consideration, which would strictly limit the method of disposal of the materials.

"That (theory) is a very real possibility," said Gilbert. "We can't say yes, that is the reason, but certainly from a practical standpoint it's very realistic."

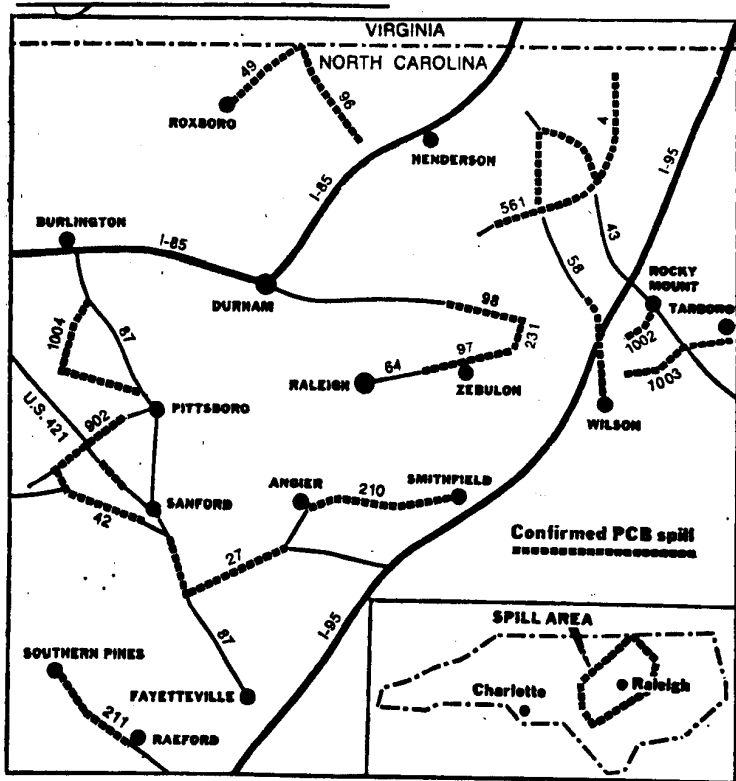
PCBs, used in transformers and capacitors for their insulating value, have been suspected of causing cancer in laboratory animals. Long-term buildups are known to cause a variety of health problems including birth defects.

State officials say they don't think the spills pose an immediate health threat. But human blood samples are being taken, wells are being tested for contamination and animal and plant samples are being examined.

Gilbert said investigators are trying to track the source of the PCBs from two ends — by finding who dumped them and by tracing sources of the chemicals from their manufacture.

Analysis of the spilled PCBs show they were chemicals manufactured by Monsanto Chemical Corp. before 1971.

Dan Bishop, director of the company's environmental division, said a list is being compiled for the state Attorney General's office of its North Carolina customers who bought the chemicals.



Broken lines on the map show the extent of recent confirmed PCB spills along N.C. highways.