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PCBs found in PG&E workers' blood

By David Alcott
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UNION CITY — Federal investigators have found PCBs in the blood of workers, on their equipment and in their lunchroom at Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Decoto Pipe Yard here.

PG&E is phasing out its major use of PCBs or polychlorinated biphenyls — as insulating oil in 81,000 power-pole capacitors — because of environmental hazards.

PCB, banned in most uses by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has been linked to a variety of health problems, including cancer, birth defects and miscarriages.

But utility officials are relying on medical experts who contend that the Decoto workers' exposure to PCB is not "an important risk to human health."

Leaders of Electrical Workers Local 1245, which represents the workers, said they find it "most disturbing" that a two-year study by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health found PCBs in the Decoto workers' blood, the air and dust they breath, the forklifts they drive, the soil they walk on and in the room where they eat.

A lunchroom "sample swipe" taken in August 1980 found 2.2 micrograms of PCBs on a table and 1.3 micrograms on a bench. A second sample was taken last June, and similar traces were found.

PG&E representatives said they would not comment on the investigation until the NIOSH report is published a few months from now. But they said the utility quickly sought a physician's opinion on the results of blood samples taken last December.

"The health significance of the range of PCB levels reported among the 14 potentially exposed individuals," Dr. Thomas Milby of Berkeley told PG&E in April, "is, in my opinion, vanishingly small."

The blood samples from seven Decoto workers and seven transformer repairmen showed PCB ranging from 21 to 70 parts per billion.

Although there is no federal standard for blood level, Milby said "no

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significant effects on health" have been observed in workers with less than 200 ppb of PCBs in their blood.

But Dr. Molly J. Coye, who is preparing NIOSH's final report, said, "We assume the samples indicate past occupational exposure to PCBs and is a strong indication that future exposure should be avoided."

But in her March 31 report on the blood samples, Coye noted that "NIOSH considers levels less than 30 ppb to be normal for people not known to be occupationally exposed."

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