EPA pledges to join PCB fight

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Staff Writer

Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. met Wednesday in Washington with White House officials and Environmental Protection Administrator Douglas M. Costle, seeking help in the cleanup and disposal of massive roadway dumpings of toxic PCBs — a task state officials said would cost more than $1 million.

"Costle promised him we'd do everything that could be done to help," an EPA spokesman said. "We did discuss whether or not federal funding would be available, but no conclusions were reached. We're still looking into that."

Meanwhile, state transportation officials estimated that one proposed method of cleaning up the contaminated highway shoulders would cost the state $860,000.

Transportation Department spokesman Cy Linn said it would take highway workers one week and about $125,000 to spread activated charcoal and a sticky binder solution over the stained road shoulders.

Scientists say such an application would chemically bind PCB molecules with the charcoal, decreasing the danger that rain would wash the toxic chemical into streams and water tables.

To remove a 3-inch-deep layer of contaminated soil with motor graders and vacuum sweepers would take about three weeks and cost $670,000, Linn said. That cost estimate included the expense of hauling the contaminated dirt to a dump site up to 50 miles away, he said, and then re-shaping and re-planting the road shoulder.

However, that $860,000 would not cover the cost of preparing dump sites that could safely receive the estimated 25,000 cubic yards of poisoned soil. Administration officials were still considering 15 possible disposal sites in ten counties. Hunt press secretary Gary Pearce said a rough estimate of $250,000 had been reached for those costs.

Pearce said Hunt had applied for federal disaster funds from the White House, but he added that such an approach was a "long shot." He said Hunt was "very pleased" the response he received from Costle and White House officials, who Pearce said promised the help of every federal agency that could be of use.

Hunt was expected to announce this morning the state's plan for digging up and burying elsewhere at least some of the roadside soil stained with toxic chemical wastes including PCBs.

The PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) were first reported two weeks ago in oily, brown stains sprayed along roadsides in 15 counties. State investigators believe the PCBs, used in transformer oils and other electrical equipment, were dumped intentionally from a tanker truck by someone seeking to avoid tough federal restrictions on the disposal of toxic chemicals.

PCBs have been linked to cancer in laboratory animals and to a variety of human ailments. Roadside residents have complained of nausea, headaches, burning eyes and other discomforts, but health officials attributed those symptoms to a non-lethal solvent oil in which the PCBs were suspended. Any effects of PCB poisoning probably would not show up for several years, they said.

Motorists and state employees have reported various roadway spills in the past week involving elsewhere such as water, motor oil and rock salt. But state chemists have not confirmed PCB presence in any dumping reported since Aug. 5.

In a letter he took to Costle, Hunt said, "I am deeply concerned about possible acute and chronic effects posed by the presence of this hazardous waste on the health of our citizens and on our environment."

Hunt wrote that the consequences of any action the state took would be "with us for generations to come. (State officials) have recommended, and I agree, that we need the best nationally available expertise because of enormous technical complexity, lack of comprehensive data and concern about the long-term adequacy of clean-up actions."

Hunt asked Costle to have the EPA's health effects research laboratory at Research Triangle Park evaluate the state's PCB data and to recommend action. He also asked Costle to provide an "on-scene, regulatory decision maker with the authority to approve any control, removal or disposal technique and site."

EPA officials already are working with officials in the state Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, but the health effects research laboratory has had little involvement so far.

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Dr. M. Thomas Wagner, acting program management director at the laboratory, said most EPA lab work in the case has been done at Athens, Ga. The Research Triangle Park facilities have been reserved primarily for long-term research, Wagner explained, including research on the health effects of PCBs.

Meanwhile on the PCB front:

☐ State agriculture officials measured PCBs on the surfaces of soybean plants growing in a field 15 feet from a contaminated shoulder of N.C. 210 in Johnston County.

William Y. Cobb, director of the Agriculture Department's feed and drug protection division, said he doubted the chemical would move into the root systems of crops and pasture grasses, but he was concerned particularly about PCB fumes contaminating the surfaces of grass consumed by dairy cattle.

☐ Attorney General Rufus L. Edmisten said his staff was drafting legislation to make unauthorized disposal of hazardous wastes a felony. "We're going for criminal penalties that will be more restrictive than those under federal laws dealing with the manufacture and disposal of toxic substances," he said.

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