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Toxic PCB Dumped On South Bay Road

1407 By Bill Wallace

A Pacific Gas & Electric Co. service crew spilled 10 to 20 gallons of transformer oil laced with highly toxic PCB onto a heavily traveled road near San Jose Wednesday night, but didn't inform local authorities of the spill until yesterday afternoon.

The spill occurred on Daves Avenue near the intersection of Winchester Boulevard around 6 p.m. Wednesday and left an 18-inch-wide, half-mile-long slick of the PCB-contaminated oil on the roadway, a spokesman for the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Department said last night.

PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — have induced cancers in laboratory animals and are considered likely causes of birth defects.

The spill — in the community of Monte Sereno, a small suburban town nestled between Saratoga and Los Gatos — apparently was caused when a transformer, which had been damaged during this week's torrential rains, tipped over after it was taken out of service.

PG&E spokesman Chris Piper said the transformer, in the back of a service truck, began leaking as the service crew drove from the area.

The spill was discovered at 6:13 p.m. when the service crew stopped at a diner in Monte Sereno.

"As I understand it, the workers discovered it (the spill) when they came out of the cafe," Piper told The Chronicle.

He said the reason for the "less than timely response" to the spill was "the press of business — there were so many outages and other problems that they just weren't able to get to it."

When PG&E officials notified the sheriff's department of the spill, Santa Clara County officials cordoned off the roadway and work crews from IT Corp. of Martinez began cleaning up the mess.

Sheriff's deputies reported that the cleanup was still under way late last night. Piper said PG&E estimated the job would be finished "before the morning commute. It will continue through the night until it is done."

Piper said there are 250 parts per million of PCB in the mineral oil spilled on the roadway, and said "the EPA says that anything above 50 parts per million is toxic."

"We have asked that if people drove their cars along this stretch of Daves Avenue near the cross street of Via Caballero and they feel that they drove their car through the spill, they should call us at (408) 253-2010 to have their car cleaned," Piper said.

Earlier in the week, an PG&E electrical transformer exploded in San Mateo County, splattering deadly PCB residue over a nearby home.

The explosion, at the intersection of Moselle Court and Kottinger Street, probably was triggered by a lightning bolt that struck the transformer, PG&E officials said.

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PCBs spill on property during storm

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Examiner East Bay Bureau

PLEASANTON — Work crews from IT Corp. were out in force this morning, cleaning up dangerous PCBs that spilled onto a rooftop, cars and greens when a transformer was knocked out yesterday, possibly by lightning.

Toxic PCBs have been shown to produce cancer in laboratory animals. A Pacific Gas & Electric Co. spokeswoman, Susanne Coffey, said the chemicals were spilled on two cars, the shingles of a rooftop, lawns and shrubbery.

A tree had to be cut down as a result of the discharge.

The PCBs were contained in "two to five gallons" of fire-retardant oil that was released when the pole-situated transformer failed and exploded during a driving rainstorm, she said.

Pleasanton police said the chemical spilled onto Moselle Court and Kottinger Street, both off First Street, at 3:10 a.m.

A police dispatcher said no one had been evacuated, nor had any streets been closed to traffic. Coffey said there was no danger to humans.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) were used routinely for four decades to insulate electric utility capacitors and transformers until the Toxic Substances Control Act banned them in 1976. The federal government considers them environmentally hazardous.

An organization representing private power companies says some 750 million pounds of PCBs remain in service, "practically all in sealed electrical equipment."

This includes, besides utility company equipment, fluorescent lights, motors and home appliances.

PG&E is replacing PCB-containing capacitors and transformers with new models that don't use the substance. Coffey said a sample of the chemical from the Pleasanton spill was sent to PG&E's research facility at San Ramon and found to be contaminated. It contained 60 parts per million of polychlorinated biphenyls — 10 ppm over what is considered contaminated or an acceptable maximum level, said Coffey.

It is generally agreed that exposure to high levels of PCBs may be either carcinogenic or may promote cancer-producing agents when mixed with other chemicals.

The Pleasanton Fire Department is monitoring the cleanup.

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