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Fresh PCB spill found in state

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A fresh strip of oily liquid, believed to be the latest in a series of PCB spills on the state's roadways, was discovered Monday afternoon along a six-mile stretch of N.C. 42 near Sanford.

According to state Highway Patrol Capt. O. R. McKinney, the new spill was discovered along a section of road already posted with chemical contamination warnings. He said the new spill is about two feet wide.

McKinney said officials suspect the spill is related to the previous spills. He said the strip has not been chemically tested.

A tanker traveling the state's highways at night is suspected of polluting more than 250 miles of the state's roadsides with toxic PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenols. Officials said that until Monday, no new spills had been reported in nearly a week.

Monday's spill was discovered just as state environmental officials were meeting to try to decide how to dispose of the contaminated soil in the spills. The officials, along with representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency, met in public and then held a private session, but failed to come up with a final proposal for disposing of the thousands of gallons of PCBs.

Robert Carter, head of the water quality division of the state Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, said officials were considering digging one to three inches into the soil in areas where PCB contamination is above the tolerable level of 500 parts per million.

"We have reached the point where something needs to be done," Carter said at the meeting.

Carter said if the soil is removed, a large area of state-owned land would be needed for storage. He said no storage sites have been selected yet.

But officials said they were also considering placing activated charcoal on the spills instead of digging up the sites. Carter said the charcoal would "fix" or bind the PCBs, keeping it on the surface and preventing it from being washed away.

Carter said the charcoal treatment would slow the migration of PCB particles but would not decontaminate them.

"We are dealing with a problem that does not pose an immediate medical risk," said Martin P. Hines, head of epidemiology for the Department of Human Resources. "We don't even think walking on the grass, and exposure two or three times, would pose a risk."

However, Hines said his department is considering taking blood and urine samples from people in the area of the spills as a precautionary measure.

Hines said researchers have found that the PCBs are a type manufactured in the late 1930s by Monsanto Chemical Corp. They were used as a heat-transmitting agent in cooking substances such as fish meal, and in electrical transformers and capacitors, he said.

Hines said state officials are attempting to contact Monsanto for information on who might have been using the chemical.