

N Carolina

Source of PCB Spills a Mystery

By LENOX RAWLINGS

Special to The Journal-Constitution

RALEIGH — Brown stains that started appearing beside some North Carolina roads earlier this month provoked one of the state's greatest mysteries.

The chemical that produced the stains, wilted grass and put off a foul odor contained toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a synthetic substance once used as insulation in transformers. PCBs have caused cancer in laboratory animals and illness in humans.

State officials have diagnosed the chemical, placed warning signs beside roads in about 15 counties and worked on plans for disposing of the waste. However, they have not found the

source of the spills, which have been presumed deliberate.

Under suspicion is a large, black tanker truck noticed by one resident late at night. Officials theorize that a firm using the chemical, probably in transformer work, dumped the waste to avoid the cost of burning it in incinerators or shipping it to a disposal site.

The Highway Patrol issued an alert for New Jersey and Connecticut license plates in general. Others suspect the truck came from Virginia.

In at least one instance, traces of the chemical were found beside a road, then stopped at an intersection and resumed on the other side of the intersection.

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The State Bureau of Investigation has entered the case and Attorney General Rufus L. Edmisten said his office is treating it as a criminal matter.

As the investigation continued last week, Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. announced that all areas contaminated by the chemical will be treated and then excavated a depth of three inches. The excavation effort will cover about 250 miles of roadside, including the edges of some fields where the chemical has spilled.

The project could cost up to \$2.5 million, which would be paid for by the state and, if Hunt is successful, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Hunt's announcement came more than a week after the chemical was identified. He defended the delay at a press conference. "I think we made an adequate response here," he said. "You can always find a way to do it better. You mustn't go around punishing people and they had to be sure they had it right."

Health officials originally decided to forgo a massive testing and education program, saying that the chemical was less dangerous than many household chemicals. A major testing program could lead to an unnecessary panic, some officials said.

The administration's latest response will include hand delivery of printed notices on PCBs to all residents who live near the affected roadways and deployment of extra patrolmen at night to watch for further spills.

Citizens have called toll-free numbers to offer clues and information about some of the spills, which occurred on several different days. Patrolmen stopped one tanker truck some near New Bern by a motorist, but the truck was carrying only water.

The state has asked Monsanto Chemical Corp. of St. Louis for a list of companies that bought the chemical, which was used extensively in the late 1940s. The EPA stopped burial of liquid PCBs last April until it could write new disposal standards, and some officials believe the ban was one reason the chemical was emptied illegally.

Briefs

• Some of Lt. Gov. James C. Green's friends have planned a fund-raising roast next month to help Green pay off a lingering \$23,000 debt from the 1978 campaign. Sen. Robert Morgan, Rep. Joe F. Andrews and retiring N.C. Supreme Court Justice I. Beverly Lake will attend the \$50-a-plate affair, which some Democrats say will hurt fund-raising efforts by Senate nominee John R. Ingram.

• Ingram, whose financial resources are dwarfed by those of Republican Sen. Jesse A. Helms, sought to obtain some money last week by playing a bit part in a dinner theater production in Greensboro. Patrons paid \$25 each for dinner and Ingram's lines in "No Hard Feelings."



ATLANTA, GA.
JOURNAL CONSTITUTION
S. 522.138
ATLANTA METROPOLITAN AREA

AUG 20 1978

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