Broomfield water tainted—harmlessly

By KEN GEPFERT
News Staff

Judging from the short notice of the press conference and grim faces of assembled officials, it appeared as though more dire news of radioactive leaks from the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant was about to be revealed.

There were cryptic messages telling of discovery of a toxic substance — ominously labeled "PCB" — in Broomfield's water supply.

But when Director of Information Services Felix Owen, flanked by two other officials of Rockwell International Corp., started their press briefing Thursday, the news was all good.

Yes, a pesky chemical compound called polychlorinated biphenyls (or PCB) had been found lurking in the sediment of Great Western Reservoir, which serves Broomfield's domestic water needs.

But, Owen hastily added, the levels of PCB discovered were well below government-established danger areas and posed "absolutely no" danger to the populace of Broomfield or its environs. What's more, Owen said there was "absolutely no" connection between radioactive materials at the Rocky Flats plant and the PCB.

In fact, there was no evidence that the PCB even came from the Rockwell-managed nuclear plant 16 miles northwest of Denver.

So why all the fuss?

It seems that Rockwell, which took over management of Rocky Flats on July 1, is a bit sensitive about the bad publicity which had dogged the former plant operator, Dow Chemical Co. That publicity was prompted by reports of plutonium leaks, illegal waste burial, an unproven disaster plan and a near catastrophic fire in 1969.

"We are comfortable with the (PCB) levels," Owen explained, "but sometimes people get a little concerned about Rocky Flats. . . . We wanted to put it in proper perspective."

But, ironically, Rockwell's ambitious attempt to put the PCB in perspective may have clouded the import of the discovery.

Lois Fischler, a hazardous materials disposal specialist for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), said later Thursday she was puzzled over Rockwell's decision to trumpet the PCB discovery so soon.

Miss Fischler said the findings released by Rockwell were from a survey being conducted

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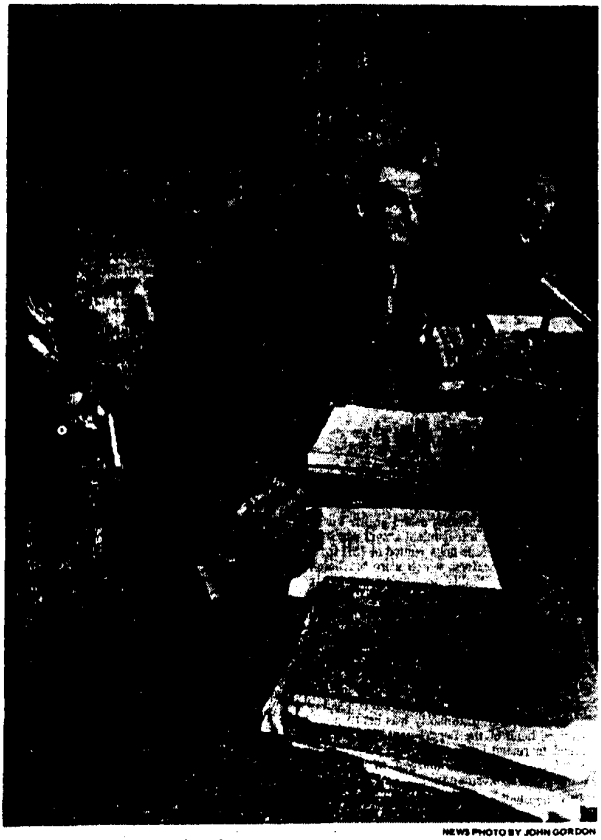

NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN GORDON

Rockwell International information director Felix Owen, center, assured reporters Thursday there is no danger from the discovery of a [illegible] pound in a reservoir close to Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant. Looking on, at [illegible] Rockwell officials Milton [illegible]

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by the EPA. And they were distributed and evaluated by company officials after EPA had collected only limited samples from one water supply.

"I'd feel much nicer if I could give you some information, but we only have two samples," Miss Fischler told a reporter.

She said the EPA recently started a nationwide program of monitoring for PCB in the wake of discovery that the compound, in common usage for 40 years, may have adverse ecological and toxicological effects.

EPA plans to monitor at least six other Colorado water supplies, she said, testing for evidence of PCB accumulation in sediment, water and fish. Discovery in water or fish would be more worrisome than presence in sediment, Miss Fischler added.

Rockwell disclosed the PCB level in the sediment of Great Western Reservoir before EPA chemists had a chance to test its water or fish. Those tests are scheduled during the next two weeks, Miss Fischler said.

The sediment samples released by Rockwell showed a mean level of 34 parts per billion of PCB in Great Western. There are no EPA standards for acceptable PCB levels in sediment, but Owen said the Great Western accumulation is "well toward the bottom" of average levels found in other U.S. water bodies.

Owen added that Rocky Flats' water discharge has been consistently below the one-part-per-billion upper limit for PCB which EPA has established for discharge into waterways by industrial facilities.

Excessive exposure to PCB could cause a disabling ailment called Yusho disease, according to literature distributed by Owen. But to show symptoms of the disease, a person would have to drink a quart of water containing one part per billion of PCB every day for 1,370 years, the literature said.

Like other industrial facilities, Rocky Flats uses PCB as a coolant in its transformers. To guard against spillage, Owen said the plant's transformers are surrounded by dikes.

While the discovery of PCB in Great Western Reservoir sediment hasn't been tied to Rocky Flats' outfalls, Owen told reporters, "To say we haven't made any contribution (to the PCB accumulation) would be putting you on."

Thursday's press briefing apparently was called after Miss Fischler received a reporter's inquiry about the first two samples' findings. She telephoned Rockwell to ask if it had released the findings and "I guess they called a press conference when they learned the press was involved," Miss Fischler said.

Asked why he decided to summon the press, Owen responded, "Let's face it, we're on trial with the people here to be open about what we do."

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