PCB phase-out

PG&E will replace equipment using chemical

SAN FRANCISCO (UPI) — Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has announced plans to phase out 120,000 units of electrical equipment that use PCB, a highly toxic chemical, as insulating fluid.

The utility's move, which it said could cost $50 million and take two to three years to carry out, came amid growing public concern over the hazards of PCB to the health and the environment.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last year outlawed the manufacturing of PCBs and restricted their use to existing closed systems such as electrical equipment. In the past, PCBs also were used extensively in paints, adhesives, caulking compounds and lubricants.

PCB has been identified as the cause of several serious health defects in humans, including painful skin diseases, miscarriages and neurological disorders. It also is suspected of causing cancer.

PG&E said Tuesday it will replace its PCB capacitors over the next three years if manufacturers can turn out the thousands of non-PCB replacement units it will need.

The PCB-filled capacitors often hang in banks of up to nine units on single power poles within PG&E's service area, stretching from the Oregon line to the Tehachapi Range.

In many cases, the capacitors are located on poles in residential neighborhoods and sometimes near schools and close to streams.

There has been increasing public focus on the utility because of frequent leaks and blowouts from the thousands of PCB-packed capacitors.

Folowing public protests, the EPA filed a civil complaint against PG&E in May, charging the utility with sloppy cleanup of PCB wastes in five separate instances.

The litigation was settled by a consent agreement last month in which PG&E neither admitted or denied the charges, but agreed to additional cleanup of several PCB spill sites and to tighten its plan for dealing with capacitor environmental pollution.

Last week, acting on an anonymous tip, state and local officials got PG&E to dig for buried PCB wastes at its Bakersfield service yard. Although the company previously insisted nothing would be found in such a search, the excavating turned up 10 old PCB capacitors. More extensive digging is planned.

The problems of PCB exposure also has caused concern among PG&E employees. In San Jose, six workers were suspended by the utility after refusing to clean up a PCB spill last June for fear of contamination.

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