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Students walked through PCB spill near school

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SAN JOSE — As many as 100 elementary school students may have walked through parts of a half-mile long trail of PCB-laced oil yesterday, horrified parents and school officials said today.

Anxious parents in the South Bay community of Monte Sereno were beseiging Los Gatos Union School District officials with phone calls today.

The chemical leaked from a transformer that was tipped over while being transported in a PG&E truck at about 6 p.m. Wednesday.

Some 10 to 20 gallons of mineral oil, containing 250 parts per million PCB, spilled onto the heavily traveled roadway, according to the utility. 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.

Cleanup efforts did not begin until yesterday. Utility officials blamed numerous power failures caused by the storm earlier in the week.

PG&E spokesman Chris Piper said the reason

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

"Our phone has been ringing off the hook," said Marge Rice, secretary at Daves Avenue Elementary School, today.

She said the school had received about 50 phone calls today.

Rice said a letter was being sent home with the school's 500 students today advising parents of what to do with possibly contaminated shoes and clothing.

Pacific Gas & Electric has set up a reception point where people can drop off clothes for cleaning.

Rice said the spill looked like "a two-foot wide oil slick."

School officials were not alerted to the spill along the street adjoining school property until the next afternoon, Thursday, around 2 p.m., after a few students had already been released from classes for the day, said Rice.

As a result, students may have walked through the oil when arriving at school yesterday morning and again when leaving school that afternoon.

PG&E officials are examining the delay in notifying the school, according to PG&E spokesman Bill Leonard in San Jose.

Officials at the school said PG&E told them of the spill as soon as the utility found out about it.

The street has since been barricaded to traffic and cleanup operations were expected to be finished by noon today.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) formerly was used as an insulator fluid in the transformers, but after the chemical was judged dangerous, PG&E began replacing PCB insulated equipment.

Piper said drivers who might have traveled on Daves Avenue near the cross street of Via Caballo should call the utility's San Jose office to have their cars cleaned.

Motorists who drove in the area should telephone PG&3 at (408) 253-2010.

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