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2 Hear of Deadly Peril In Backyard Barrels

By Susan Guffey
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LAFAYETTE, Colo. — Wayne and Marie Darling say they were "devastated" to learn they have lived more than five years next to 17 barrels of the toxic, cancer-causing chemical PCB — at least one of which is leaking.

"We've been living here in the country, trying to live clean, healthy lives and here we have the most horrible thing in the world in our backyard," Mrs. Darling sobbed during a telephone interview.

She was waiting for results of tests that would determine whether her breast milk contained more than natural levels of the dangerous substance.

Her son, Matthew, will be one year old on Friday and she said her "first thought when all this started was for my baby, what may have happened to him."

Last week, regional officials from the Environmental Protection Agency determined that the soil around the 17 barrels was contaminated with PCB.

Causes Illnesses

PCB is considered dangerous in small quantities and is known to cause skin and liver damage, cancer, fetal deformities and even death. Manufactured for use inside coils where extreme heat is present — like electrical transformers — PCB was banned earlier this year by the EPA. State health officials say PCB's effects can be cumulative and not immediately apparent.

The Darlings, who are vegetarians, raise chickens on the land they rent, eating some of the eggs and giving some to friends. The chickens roam the area, including the area next to the barn near the barrels.

The chickens and eggs also are being tested for PCB contamination.

An investigation revealed that the barrels were placed on the property by a relative of the owner, who thought they contained cooking oil and was going to use the oil to weatherize fences.

A self-employed auto mechanic, Darling said "a couple of years ago," he wrote the manufacturer, Monsanto Chemical Corp. of St. Louis, what the substance could be used for.

Darling said "a man who said he was a salesman called me back and said the barrels contained a dangerous chemical," so Darling did not disturb them. David Wood of Monsanto said Saturday that the company has not been able to find any record of contact with Darling.

Report on Television

Darling said it was only last Tuesday, when he and his wife watched a public-television special about PCB and other toxic chemicals, that he realized the horrible potential outside his door.

Thursday, an EPA inspector confirmed that potential.

The barrels now are surrounded by chain-link fence while the EPA decides how to move them to Idaho for permanent disposal.

As she waited for the first test results, Mrs. Darling recalled that she and her husband had been thinking about moving because the small town of Lafayette is getting too crowded.

"Now," she said, "we're thinking about it real hard."

This story also appeared in:

New Orleans (La.) Times-Picayune
Dallas (Tx.) Morning News
Colorado Springs (Colo.) Sun
Virginia-Pilot Ledger Star (Norfolk)