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Huge Quantities Of Deadly PCB Stored in Area

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The General Services Administration, in violation of federal regulations, has been storing 2,500 gallons of the banned deadly chemical PCB in leaking, rusting drums in Bladensburg, next to a creek that empties into the Anacostia and Potomac rivers, according to a GSA internal auditors' report obtained yesterday.

The drums are stacked in a ground-level, garage-type area at the GSA's bulk storage facility in the Maryland suburb. During heavy rains, the storage area periodically floods, the report said.

As a Washington Post reporter and photographer arrived at the storage facility yesterday, two men operating forklifts were removing storage drums from the garage area and stacking them outside.

"They told us to get this done before you all got here," said Richard A. Meaner, foreman of the storage facility.

Asked why the drums were being removed, Meaner said his supervisor told him to "pull them out and put labels on them" and to "secure all doors."

The auditors' report said GSA's violation of minimal standards imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency for storage of the chemical creates a potential hazard to GSA employes and "the community in general."

When inhaled, PCB has been found to cause cancer in animals and to attack the transmission system of human PCB is polychlorinated biphenyl, a chemical formerly used as a lubricant and high-temperature coolant in electrical transformers and industrial machinery. The use of PCB was banned by federal law in 1977.

No evidence has been presented to link the Bladensburg facility to any illnesses in the area. The material has been stored at Bladensburg for four years.

Matt Strauss, the EPA official in charge of PCB disposal programs, said he could not determine whether the material poses any danger to residents until he has inspected the facility.

"If it's as bad as what you're saying, the [GSA] facility is in violation of EPA regulations," Strauss said. "I will call up our enforcement branch, and they will get on it right away," he said.

GSA officials said they already have discussed the problem with other EPA officials, who said there

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was little they could do about it.

"Essentially, we don't know what to do with it," Ted Leininger, the GSA official responsible for the storage facility, said yesterday. "EPA can't tell us what to do with it. You can't ship it across state lines. There's no way to destroy it," he said.

Leininger, director of GSA's buildings operations division, said the agency has begun monitoring PCB levels in the air at the facility. So far, he said, the levels have been below the maximum levels allowed by the EPA. He said GSA has posted signs warning that the drums contain PCB and will transfer the material into containers considered safe by the EPA "as soon as we can find some."

Howard R. Davis, GSA's director of audits, said yesterday, "It seems to me corrective action is rather simple. You can move it to a higher level several miles away (to avoid flooding). You can do simple things to eliminate the hazard."

Davis' staff uncovered the conditions at Bladensburg during a routine review of operations there.

The GSA storage facility is a 2-story brick warehouse located in a busy industrial park. A creek runs by the corner of the warehouse where the PCB is stored, then goes underground for about 100 yards before surfacing again at the entrance of the Historic Port of Bladensburg Marina on the nearby Anacostia River.

The Anacostia runs into the Potomac about seven miles southwest of that point.

There is no evidence that any of the contaminated material has entered the creek.

"I've been trying to get rid of this (the PCB) for five years," said Messer, the foreman. "Nobody would pay any attention to us until this (GSA) report came out." Messer said he and his employes go near the PCB storage area "as rarely as possible."

Asked what safety precautions he was told to take in moving the 55-gallon drums yesterday, Messer said, "None that I know of except . . . not to touch it."

Some of the employes work in a GSA sign-making shop directly above the PCB storage area. Some of them said yesterday they have been bothered by fumes and one said he has had unexplained medical problems.

During one fume-smelling incident, sign-shop foreman Everis Forsyth said, "I was crying and choking and everything else. . . . I felt nauseated. We (smelled) very strong fumes."

Forsyth said his health is deteriorating and his doctor is unable to say why. Forsyth said he didn't know if PCB may be at the root of his problems. He said GSA's safety division told him there was nothing wrong and refused to test water from the stream for toxic chemicals.

While transformer coolant using PCBs is no longer made, GSA still uses 200,000 gallons of previously purchased contaminated material in transformers in federal buildings in the Washington area.

The material is taken to Bladensburg when coolant is changed or leaks.

Messer, the facility's foreman, said the drums were being taken outside yesterday so they could be labeled as containing PCB and would then be restacked so they would not be on top of each other.

It was not clear where the drums would be placed next, since the garage apparently did not have room to hold them without stacking them on top of each other. The GSA auditors criticized this practice because they feared the drums would tumble and split open.

The auditors, in an internal report prepared on Oct. 15, said the area where the PCB is stored was the scene of a flash flood last summer. They said the water entered the garage where the drums are stored.

GSA was violating EPA regulations that require periodic inspections of the drums and labeling of their contents, the auditors said.

"Employes responsible for the storage of PCB are unaware of the handling safeguards that should be followed," the auditors said. "At Bladensburg the pallets of PCB containers are stacked with no safeguards to prevent drums from falling."

The report said the drums are rusty, and several show signs of having leaked. In one case, when a leak occurred, the material was poured into another drum, and the contaminated container was left outdoors near the creek, the auditors said.

"Since PCB leakage has occurred in the past," the auditors said, "we believe a threat may exist to the safety of employes working directly above the storage area [in a GSA sign shop.]"

Strauss, the EPA official, said the agency's regulations require companies and government agencies to store PCB in facilities that meet EPA standards and are approved by EPA before they are used.

He said PCB eventually will be disposed of by burning it, but EPA has not yet approved any incinerators capable of the task.

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