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Level of PCBs now below danger point in S.F. high-rise

By Terry Link
The Tribune

SAN FRANCISCO — Results of recent tests for PCBs at 1 Market Plaza, the high-rise building contaminated May 15 by a fire in a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. vault, show levels well below the danger point, said Dr. Richard Wade, manager of hazardous materials for the county health department.

Wade said late last week that 20 air samples taken after the air-conditioning system for the first eight floors of the building was finally turned on, showed a level of 0.14 micrograms per cubic meter of air. The legal limit for safety is 1 microgram per cubic meter, he said, "so we're well below the standard."

With PCBs now at safe levels, testing for dioxin and TCDF — a compound 1,000 times more toxic than PCBs — has begun, Wade said. If results of these tests are as positive as the ones for PCBs, the lower floors of the building will be reopened, he said. Results of the dioxin tests will take about three weeks, he said.

Testing for PCBs preceded that for dioxin, Wade said, because PCB level is an indicator of dioxin, which is dangerous in even more minuscule doses than the carcinogenic PCBs. "If the PCB level hadn't been down, we would have had to start the whole process over again," Wade said.

That "whole process" was a 4½-month effort by approximately 300 persons — costing $15 million to $20 million — to decontaminate the basement and first eight stories of the building that have remained closed since the fire.

The decontamination process, according to a PG&E spokeswoman, included chipping six inches of concrete from the floor of the underground electrical vault containing the burning transformer that spewed the deadly smoke into the atmosphere near the intake of the building ventilation system for the lower floors.

The entire tower was closed following the fire. But tests showed that the upper 18 floors, which have a separate air-conditioning system, were safe for people. Meanwhile, the lengthy effort to decontaminate the lower floors began.

Much of the decontamination work was done by IT Corp. of Martinez, but IT vice president Paul Kaufman said he could not discuss it without permission from Virgil Rose, PG&E supervisor of the cleanup. Rose's office referred all questions to PG&E public relations aide Faith Kramer, who said no interview with IT personnel would be granted.

Kramer said decontamination of the building itself included washing down the exterior walls, vacuuming, wiping down and repainting the air intake and air shafts and fan room, replacing insulation in all the ventilation ducts, and cleaning the coils of the air-conditioning system with a process adapted from nuclear power plants.

Another part of the process included the filming of Fireman's Fund Insurance Co. records that had been contaminated from behind plastic barriers so they could be reproduced on microfiche cards, Kramer said.

Besides Fireman's Fund, other businesses in the building have suffered from the effects of the fire. Del Monte Corp., for instance, the largest single tenant in the tower with about 10 floors leased — half of its space on floors still closed — found its operations seriously hampered, a spokesman said.

About 600 employees and the computer have been relocated to other quarters, "but some things we just can't duplicate, such as our test kitchens, which are unique on the West Coast," he said.

He said he could not put a dollar amount on the damage suffered by the firm, but "we expect to be covered for our losses" by PG&E.

Several smaller businesses in the building have sued PG&E and more have adopted a wait-and-see position before deciding whether to file.

Molinari, Casalnuovo and Berger, a law firm with offices on the 23rd floor of the tower, has sued PG&E on behalf of four other tenants, including the Orient Express restaurant, for approximately $750,000 in damages. Attorney Gary P. Vannelli said six other suits were under consideration.

Paul Saeedi, a partner in Infomax computer store, which was scheduled to open the day after the fire occurred, said he was "waiting to see" what PG&E would offer before filing suit, "but it really has impacted our business."

The closure delayed the Infomax opening until Sept. 23 when after moving to smaller quarters elsewhere in the building, Infomax held a "fire sale" and sold Apple II and IBM computers that had been in the store at the time of the fire but were not contaminated.

Because the fire occurred on a Sunday afternoon when the building and nearby area was nearly deserted, there appear to be no serious health problems resulting directly from the fumes, according to a spokeswoman at San Francisco General Hospital, where 139 persons were questioned on their exposure.