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Bethel Island PCB spill cleanup starts

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Lesher News Bureau

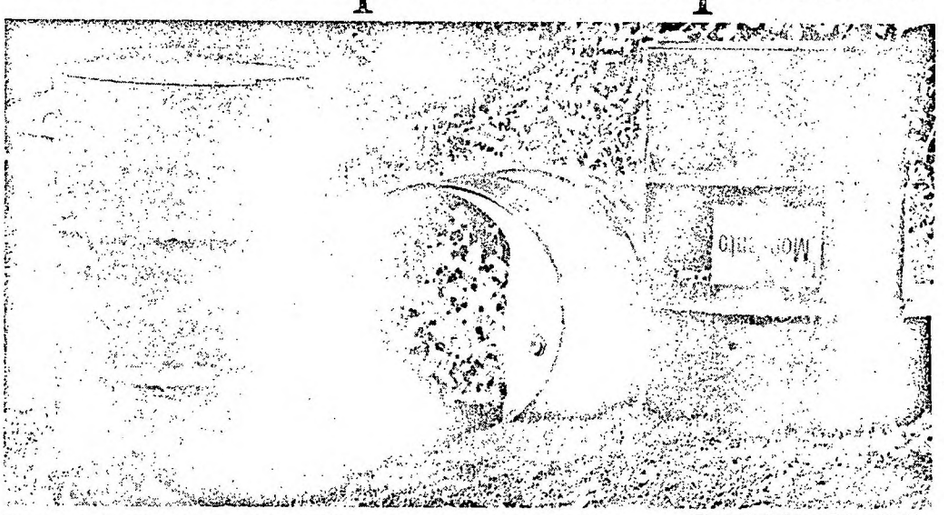
BETHEL ISLAND — Cleanup of an "extremely hazardous" spill of about 150 gallons of PCB-contaminated oil on and near Stone Road was scheduled to begin this morning at 8 a.m.

PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — has the potential to do a "great deal of harm to the environment," according to Bruce Benike of the county occupational health services.

"If you get it on you and lick your finger, you probably wouldn't get sick," he said. However, he explained, PCB residue has such a long half-life that the chemical accumulates in the body.

Benike said Bethel Island firefighters worked around the clock last night manning barriers to prevent people from coming into the area.

Benike said the county was notified of the spill Tuesday night and by 10:30 p.m. it had been determined the concentration of PCBs was 2,600 ppm in the liquid itself and 3,400 ppm in the contaminated soil.



Three rusting barrels containing PCB rest in a Bethel Island field. Times photo/Lynne Dobson-Keeble

"That's a 2 to 3 percent concentration of PCB," said Benike — a very high concentration, he said.

The four barrels containing the PCB-contaminated oil were brought to the property six or seven years ago by the former owner of the property, Benike said.

Present owner Tony Montooth of Palo Alto said he bought the property on Stone Road two months ago but only recently discovered the four rusting 55-gallon drums. Sunday he decided to get rid of them and rolled them across the road to drain.

Montooth said the barrels were leaking badly and he did get some on his hands. He estimated a spill of 150 gallons.

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Four drums of PCB found in Bethel Island field

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"It was kind of like Vaseline oil, only clear," he said.

Montooth said he had planned to take the drums to a dump this weekend. In the meantime a neighbor reported the rusting barrels to the Sheriff's Department.

Benike said the former owner of the property, who he could identify only as a man called Weiss, admitted he brought the barrels to Bethel Island from his place of employment, an electrical equipment manufacturing company in the South Bay. Benike said the man told him that he at first wanted to use the liquid in the barrels as a "dust control."

"But he claims he didn't use it," Benike said.

However, Benike said, the county will be doing background sample tests to make sure none of the PCB-contaminated material was sprayed on the ground.

Benike added that one of the barrels had completely rusted out and was empty but that the rest of the contamination was recent.

Montooth was at the scene early Wednesday morning wearing plastic sacks on his shoes to protect himself from further PCB exposure.

"I hope I have recourse from the previous owner, because I guess I'm responsible for getting this cleaned up," he said.

Benike said Montooth will be given the clean-up bill, which he estimated would be around $5,000.

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Benike said the contaminated liquid would be removed to disposal sites in Idaho or Alabama and the soil to Casmalia on the California coast or Kettleman City in the Central Valley.

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