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County PCB cleanup slated during holiday

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Lesher News Bureau

MARTINEZ — Contra Costa County officials are taking advantage of a four-day holiday for their employees to clean up electrical equipment in the county administration building that is laden with cancer-causing PCB's.

"We have a transformer in the building that has oil in it that has PCB's in it," acknowledged Robert Rygh, deputy director of the county's buildings and grounds. "We've known about it for some time and monitored it."

Employees were to be away from the 12-story administration building at 651 Pine St. for holiday observances of Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays. Crews from a company called Retro Serv of Rancho Cordova were to take charge of the $13,000 project to remove the PCB-laden oil from the transformer located in the building basement.

PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, were used as an insulating substance developed by the Monsanto Chemical Co. and produced until 1977, when authorities learned it can cause skin rashes, dizziness and cancer. It was commonly used in electrical equipment.

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has been working to clean up PCB's in its utility pole capacitors, some of which have burst from overheating and spilled the substance near roads, homes and businesses.

"We sat on the thing for two or three years, knowing we had it," Rygh said Thursday, adding that the county acted on advice from PG&E about cleaning up the material.

"It was their advice just to leave it be until you come up with a way of disposing it," he said.

An East Bay PG&E spokesman couldn't be reached for comment.

The Sacramento-area firm in charge of the weekend project will drain the transformer of the oil, flush it and haul the contaminated oil away in large drums, after cleaning up the area as a safeguard.

All but the much smaller north wing of the administration building has been declared off limits to any employees who may have contemplated dropping by the offices over the weekend.

Leon Billington of RetroServe hung up during a telephone inquiry after declining to discuss the operation, and wouldn't say where the PCB's will be dumped.

Jerry Bechtold, county buildings and grounds maintenance manager, sent a memo to employees asking them not to enter the administration building over the long weekend.

The memo said only that "major work" on the building's electrical system was planned.

"Once it's gone, we'll be relieved," Rygh said. "We won't have to worry about it any more."

Supervisor Nancy Fahden of Martinez said the PCB project came as a surprise, although the Board of Supervisors last spring had asked PG&E for periodic updates on its cleanup progress with PCB's.

"It makes me feel embarrassed. Frankly, it's upsetting," she said, adding that when the board meets Tuesday she will ask for an explanation of the delay in learning of the PCB presence and its cleanup.

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