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Ministry of the Environment

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NO ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH HAZARD FROM TRANSFORMER FIRE -- ENVIRONMENT MINISTER McCAGUE

Intensive scientific investigation over the past two months has established that PCBs and related trace contaminants emitted from a transformer fire last December presented no hazard to public health, Environment Minister George R. McCague announced today.

The Environment Minister released a report containing results of tests for PCB-related compounds conducted in samples of soot and oil from the Adelaide St. East fire involving a Toronto Hydro transformer.

An estimated 100 of a total of 450 gallons of transformer fluid containing polychlorinated biphenyls were spilled as a result of the fire. Small quantities of the fluid were vaporized.

Environment Ontario's laboratory reported that one tetrachlorodibenzo furan was positively identified in a soot sample taken at the fire site at an estimated concentration of 2.5 parts per million. A range of other chlorodibenzo furans were tentatively identified at a total estimated concentration of 5 ppm. The analysis also tentatively identified 0.05 ppm traces of the furan compound in the transformer fluid.

Based on this information, Dr. Doug Harding of occupational health in the Ministry of Labour has indicated he does not expect any significant risk to the health of people who may have been exposed as a result of the fire.

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"There have been no documented cases of adverse health effects from exposure at the fire scene to PCBs or related compounds," said Dr. Harding. "This medical opinion is consistent with our interpretation of the findings of the ongoing research and monitoring program related to the Adelaide Street incident."

Environment Ontario laboratory staff began analysis of soot samples and of PCB transformer fluid in mid-December but could not test for other compounds until advanced equipment was attained and a methodology developed. Further testing began in mid-January using newly-installed, ultra-sensitive equipment which led to the discovery of one tetrachlorodibenzo furan and the presence of other members of the same chemical family.

"Our first tests detected no toxic trace contaminants other than PCBs in either sample," said Ministry laboratory services director Gerry Ronan.

"We were unable to establish the presence of any of the dibenzo dioxin compounds, which were considered as possible trace contaminants."

The Ministry laboratory began the intensive investigation into possible trace contaminants from the fire when they found no information covering similar situations in other jurisdictions.

"While there has been some speculation on the products resulting from the breakdown in electrical fires, it would appear that until now, no one has taken a thorough look at these situations. This report and any further study we perform will give us some sound scientific information which can be applied to dealing with and investigating transformer fires both in Ontario and elsewhere," said Mr. Ronan.

On December 20, the Ministry reported the results of air tests taken in buildings near the fire scene. Dr. Harding said levels at 60 and 36 Adelaide Street East were all less than one microgram of PCB per cubic meter of air and considered to present no undue risk to individuals who may have been exposed.

The results of further tests through December and January showed a steady decline in PCB levels.

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