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Employers balk at protection against PCBs

They insist nobody proved them hazardous

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By Tim Reiterman

Claiming there is no clear evidence of health hazards associated with PCBs, California's largest utilities and other companies are opposing proposed state standards that would require employers to protect an estimated 10,000 workers potentially exposed.

Tonight's hearings on the Division of Occupational Safety and Health's proposed standard for the suspected carcinogen shaped up as classic conflict between labor, which largely supports the proposal, and business interests, which oppose any new requirements or want to modify the proposal.

"We are looking to protect workers from skin contact," state toxicologist Alvin Greenberg told a news briefing this morning. "Unfortunately some industries are good about handling them (PCBs), and some are not."

The proposed standards would require employers to provide protective clothing and equipment to workers around the chemical, decontamination facilities such as showers, a "safe practices" document at the scene, and training for workers either handling PCBs or working on cleanup of the substance. State safety officials say they do not know what implementation of the standards would cost industry.

Both before and after the first such hearing Aug. 27 in San Diego, interested parties submitted letters and reports to Cal/OSHA, commenting on the standards, which are touted as the first comprehensive regulations dealing with occupational exposure to PCBs.

In the past, Cal/OSHA has issued "special orders" to protect workers handling PCB's — and some of the targets of those special orders currently are opposing the proposed standards as unnecessary or redundant. For example, Greenberg said, Pacific Gas & Electric and General Electric have been the subject of past worker complaints about careless handling and procedures involving PCBs.

Without naming the company involved, Greenberg said one, for instance, failed to cordon off a PCB spill and allowed employes and machinery to track it around.

Although state officials acknowledge that some companies, including PG&E have been following a number of the proposed safety practices already, utilities — which have PCBs in thousands of older electrical transformers — have registered the strongest opposition to the standards.

Although PG&E is in the middle of a phaseout of all electrical transformers containing PCBs and has experienced numerous spills, PG&E attorney Michael Jonas wrote, "in further support of our argument that no standard is necessary." He enclosed recent studies and reports supporting the contention that PCB was slightly toxic or practically non-toxic.

Southern California Edison wrote Oct. 15: "As of this date we have not received . . . any solid evidence that PCBs present a potential health hazard that cannot be adequately protected by existing Cal/OSHA standards."

Bethlehem Steel wrote Aug. 7: "A standard as stringent . . . is not required based on the existing knowledge of the health risks associated with PCB exposure."

General Electric wrote Aug. 12: "There appears to be no real need. . . The Environmental Protection Agency has not thoroughly conclusive data that PCB now in the environment has caused . . . damage to fish, animals or fowls."

Noting laboratory evidence of the cancer-causing properties of PCBs, Greenberg said that the state is not prepared to wait for widespread evidence of cancer among humans before establishing worker safety standards.

The California State Employees Association was one of the labor groups supporting the standards in general. However, the CSEA in an Aug. 17 letter questioned the proposed exemption of employees handling capacitors or ballasts containing less than three pounds of PCB fluid. It noted that hundreds of fluorescent fixtures at the state's Sonoma Development Center have leaking ballasts with high concentrations of PCBs.

"There are employees who regularly remove these 'wet' ballasts at the rate of 30 to 40 per week," the CSEA wrote, noting that the workers have neither protective clothing nor training in PCB handling.

At the same facility, the CSEA said, janitors and secretaries have routinely used paper towels and rags to mop up PCB that leaked onto desks from the light fixtures.

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