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Chemical storage method probed

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RIVERSIDE (AP) — An aerospace contractor's method of storage for a suspected cancer-causing chemical is under investigation after admissions by company officials that unlawfully high levels of the chemical were kept for more than one year.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Occupational Health and Safety Administration are looking into Rohr Industries Inc.'s handling of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls).

If found in violation of state and federal regulations regarding the chemical, Rohr could face fines.

PCBs, used in heat transfer fluids because of their stability at high temperatures, have been found to cause cancer and sterility and impair liver functions in laboratory animals.

The compounds enter the body through breathing, eating and absorption through skin and eyes and are grouped among the most toxic when burned. Aside from their long range effects, they can immediately cause a severe skin irritation called "chloracne" and darkening of the skin.

The 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act banned manufacture of PCB substances — those containing 50 parts per million or more of the compounds. Handling rules aimed at forcing the chemical's gradual withdrawal were issued in May 1979.

The rules permit use of PCBs in vented heat-transfer systems, such as the one at Rohr, until 1984, but required that the fluid in the system to be tested for PCB content no later than Nov. 1, 1979. If the test showed a concentration of 50 ppm or more, the system had to be drained and refilled within six months with a solution of less than 50 ppm.

Rohr tested the Monsanto Corp. thermal oil in March 1979 and found 2,300 ppm PCBs. Under the EPA regulations, the company should have drained the system in September 1979, but did not do so until November 1980.

"We apparently didn't start as early as we should have," said Jacqueline Jenerette, manager of public relations for the Chula Vista-based firm.

As a result of the flushing, the PCB count in the fluid now in use is 38 ppm, Jenerette said.

The company has built a concrete slab to store 700 55-gallon drums of the chemical as required by federal regulations, but the slab has cracked. And the company has covered the barrels only with a tarpaulin although the rules require roof and walls.

The Cal OSHA began looking into Rohr after some workers complained they feared health problems because of their exposure to the chemical. The workers say the PCBs were carelessly managed and that some chemical spilled and seeped into the soil.

The company admitted spills have occurred and that since September three fires have broken out in the equipment using the PCBs.

Cal OSHA has adopted guidelines but no enforceable rules regarding exposure through skin contact to dangerous chemicals, said Richard Wade, Cal OSHA's deputy chief for health.

Mechanic Gary Russell, 27, said the protective clothing was "like a paper suit" and mechanic Jim Cifu, 30, said the gloves were made of plastic or rubber — which are not acceptable under OSHA's non-enforceable guidelines.

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