Mill Valley, Ca.
(Marin Co.)
Pacific Sun
(Cir. W. 12,500)

SEP 1 1 1981

Allen's P. C. B Est. 1888

Poisoned gas lines: a search for PCBs

1407 By Linda Xiques

Within the next two months PG&E will begin testing for PCB emissions in the homes of some customers with gas appliances. The tests are the second phase of an ongoing effort to determine first, if PCBs are present in the gas lines, second, if PCBs are traveling through the lines and into home meters and third, what can be done to mitigate the problem.

Prodded by the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), PG&E began testing for PCBs when high levels of the chemical (suspected of causing cancer as well as liver and brain damage) were discovered in gas lines serving customers on Long Island, N.Y. Subsequent tests inside East Coast homes showed increased traces of PCBs when gas appliances were turned on.

Of 417 California sites tested, 142 showed evidence of PCB in the gas lines, some of them at levels higher than the 50 parts per million currently deemed safe by the EPA. The next step will be to check for PCB-contaminated oil residues in home meters in those areas.

According to John Dutcher, utility engineer for the PUC (which must review and approve PG&E's test methodology), "We're partway through the process . . . . Now we're ready to continue the program, which would involve testing for PCBs either in the gas stream or the ambient air." Dutcher hopes to hand over the results of the testing to the EPA by the end of the year.

Although PCBs (polychlorinated byphenyls) were once widely used in American industry, their manufacture has been banned since 1979. At one time utility companies used PCB-laced oil as insulating fluid in electrical equipment and many capacitors and transformers on city streets still contain the liquid. Just last week a short circuit in a transformer at Mission and Lincoln in San Rafael caused a pint of oil (later tested at 327 ppm of PCBs) to spew out onto the street.



The idea that PCBs might travel into home pipelines prompted the recent flurry of testing.

During the 1950s PCB was introduced into gas lines as a rust inhibitor and was used in gas line compressor stations up until 1979. Since PCBs do not break down naturally, whatever was introduced into the gas lines remained there, moving around with the flow of gas. The idea that it could travel into gas meters and home pipelines is a new one however, prompting the recent flurry of testing.

John Benzon, district manager for PG&E in Marin, doubts that any homes in the county will be tested for emissions since little PCB was discovered in local

continued on page 14

PCB-ARCH-EXT0376205

Poisoned gas lines

continued from page 13

pipes. Of the four sites checked in Marin, only one showed traces of PCB residues — at levels of 26 ppm and 27 ppm. The line was subsequently drained, purged and retested with no evidence of PCBs remaining. Benzon explained that at one time gas was actually manufactured in San Rafael and he presumes the residue of PCB-contaminated oil dates back to that time.

Normally semi-solid or liquid, PCBs vaporize only at temperatures of 400 degrees. People familiar with the chemical composition are at a loss to explain how PCBs could mix with gas and be emitted into homes as was apparently the case in New York.

Said Benzon, "We simply don't know of a case where PCBs have left their liquid state and gone into a gaseous state." And he insists that to *push* the oil through household pipes would take a lot more pressure than is normally available. "The recent incident in San Francisco [where a gas main was punctured and PCB oil sprayed over the financial district] was a high-pressure explosion . . . . The pressure in a customer gas line is more like a quarter of a pound."

JoAnn Semones of the San Francisco EPA office offered one possible explanation for the presence of PCBs in home pipelines back East. There, she said, utility companies periodically "fog their lines" — that is, push anti-corrosive agents through their gas lines at very high pressure. This is not a common practice in California. Semones confirmed that PCB levels reported in New York were significantly higher than those being discovered out here.

As to what can be done about the PCBs if PG&E's continuing tests reveal significant amounts in home meters or pipelines, Semones declined to speculate. "It's too premature," she said. "We would have to see how extensive it is before deciding on mitigation."

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PCB-ARCH-EXT0376206