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Iowa Has Narrow Escape From Load Of Deadly PCB

Thousands of gallons of a solvent containing the highly toxic substance polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) has been detected in Iowa before they were to be spread on gravel roads, a state official said.

Pete Hamlin, an official with the Dept. of Environmental Quality (DEQ), said a disaster probably was averted by the detection. The substance was mistaken at first as crank case oil and would have been spread on dusty, gravel roads, Hamlin said.

There was enough PCB "to kill or cripple most of the population in Iowa" if it would have contaminated food or water supplies, the director of the DEQ's Land Quality Management Division said.

PCB is a thick, colorless and odorless liquid that is virtually indestructible and can cause cancer and birth defects if ingested. It has been held responsible for deaths throughout the world.

Hamlin said the Environmental Protection Agency office in Kansas City, MO contacted him Thursday with the report that 10,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated liquid was going to Omaha, NB from St. Paul, MN. Hamlin said he found out Friday the shipment was in Iowa.

Hamlin said that a driver for Capitol Oil, Inc. of Omaha was delivering what he thought was crank case oil to Schmitty's Road Oiling Company of Cedar Falls owned by Al Schmidt there.

Hamlin said the driver had mistakenly loaded his tanker with the solvent containing 6 parts per thousand PCB's. Hamlin said the

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safe level in drinking water is 1 part per trillion. So if the roads would have been sprayed "it could have been catastrophic."

Hamlin said the driver had been stopped by St. Paul, MN authorities after he allegedly took the liquid from a company there. The driver told the authorities it was his 5th delivery to Schmidt, Hamlin said.

Hamlin said Schmidt was unaware that the liquid contained PCB when he purchased it. Schmidt was unavailable for comment late Friday.

Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Company of St. Louis, MO, the only U.S. manufacturer of the chemical, has said it would discontinue production by late this year. PCB once was widely used in copying paper, printing ink, electrical equipment and as a thickener.

Heading: Stored In Tanks

Hamlin said the chemical is now in Schmidt's tanks in Cedar Falls and Ft. Dodge. He said Schmidt has said the liquid won't be spread and that Black Hawk County officials are taking legal steps to block any such action.

Unfortunately, he added, the shipment has contaminated oil already in the tanks. So the volume to be disposed of has increased to 30,000 gallons. He said Monsanto owns the only incinerator capable of destroying the chemical, but the company will only accept its own product, refusing to burn imported PCB.

Hamlin said the DEQ will sample the tanks and attempt to determine where the PCB originated. "It would be too good to be true if it were from Monsanto," he said, adding that the other alternative, an expensive one, would be to ship it to a chemical land fill.

In 1968 some 1,000 Japanese accidentally ate rice tainted with PCB's and suffered a variety of ill effects, including ulcers, jaundice, swelling, loss of hair, birth defects and death.

"It really is scarey," Hamlin said, "I hope to God we don't have another one."

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