PCB Cleanup Shuts Tower in New York



By PAUL L. MONTGOMERY
Special to The New York Times

BINGHAMTON, N.Y., Feb. 19 — Every morning for the last two weeks, squads of workers equipped with goggles and respirators, and wearing disposable vinyl gloves and white coveralls, have been passed through the police barricades at the State Office Building here to attack the poisonous soot that has infiltrated each floor of the 18-story building.

The contamination by soot laden with polychlorinated biphenyls — PCB's — was the result of a fire in a basement transformer before dawn on Feb. 5. Every item in the building, from lottery tickets on sale in the lobby to the law books in the Court of Claims, received a dusting of the chemical, identified as a cause of cancer.

The building, the tallest in downtown Binghamton, was not occupied at the time of the fire and has been closed since, its hunting departments and 700 employees scattered in temporary offices throughout the city, which is in the central portion of the state.

The cleanup is expected to take at least several months, and cost at least $900,000. Officials confronted with the rare accident are still feeling their way.

"It's an experimental situation," said David Seiffert, coordinator of the cleanup for the state's Office of General Services. "As best we can tell, no one has managed to contaminate an office building before."

Use of PCB's in new equipment was banned by Congress in 1976, but thousands of transformers that were built before that date and that used the chemical as a coolant are still in use.

PCB's are stable compounds — also used in waxes and inks — that only can be broken down to their benign components by incineration for two seconds at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. This chemical stability explains the remarkable persistence of PCB's, which find their way into ground water and eventually the food chain. In humans, the chemical accumulates in fatty tissue and is neither eliminated nor broken down.

Fire Vaporized Coolant

In transformers, the relatively nonflammable oil is circulated in sealed chambers to cool the copper parts. The transformer in the modern State Office Building, completed in 1972, contained 180 gallons of the liquid under General Electric's trade name, Pyranol; the liquid is 65 percent PCB's.

According to Mr. Seiffert, an engineer, the fire apparently burst the pressure seal on the Pyranol chamber and vaporized the liquid. The vapor became attached to soot particles, which was spread throughout building through the air-conditioning ducts. He estimated that 100 gallons of Pyranol was lost that way; the remaining 80 gallons spilled and were cleaned up in the basement after the fire.

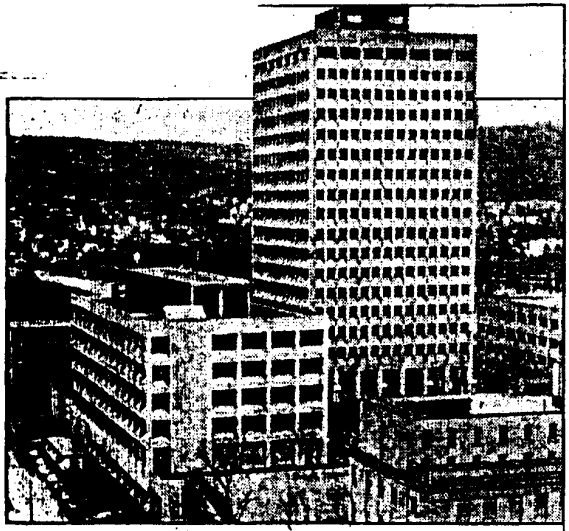
After the Federal ban on PCB's, manufacturers argued that it would be impractical to replace the prescribed coolant in older transformers with less pernicious substances. Mr. Seiffert said that, in light of the accident here, that view might change, particularly for equipment that is near air-circulating devices.

Round-the-Clock Effort

Mr. Seiffert said tests on the air in the building after the fire showed it to be "quite clean," with two or three micrograms of PCB's per cubic meter. He said that Federal law allowed as much as 500 micrograms per cubic meter, but that a *substitute standard* proposed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health was 1 microgram per cubic meter.

"The real problem is that no one knows what the standard should be," the engineer said. "The State Department of Health is testing air in other office build-

MONS 010593



The New York Times/Bill Miller

Squad of workmen in goggles and respirators cleaning up poisonous soot in the 18-story State Office Building, above, in Binghamton, N.Y. The cleanup is expected to take several months.

bags in Binghamton to see what an average acceptable level would be. Then we'll have to clean the building until we meet the standard."

The main task in the cleanup is removal of the layer of soot and dust, which is about 10 percent PCB's. Thirty-two workers from the New England Pollution Control Company of East Norwalk, Conn., which is under contract to the state, are working in 12-hour shifts, seven days a week vacuuming and scrubbing. So far, they have completed the first cleaning of the 17th, 16th and 15th floor and started on the 14th today.

Much material — drapes, carpets, upholstery, blank forms, desk calendars — was thrown away because it would not be worth the trouble to clean. Important documents have been bagged and put in a secure area of the basement.

All of the discarded material, as well as material used in the cleaning, is sealed in steel drums for burial at especially licensed landfill sites in Niagara Falls and Williamsburg, Ohio.

Workers in the city and Broome County office buildings, which share the monumental downtown plaza with the state building, have been uneasy since the fire. Officials have met several times with them to give assurances that their buildings are not contaminated, and that the cleanup will proceed with regard for their safety.

Workers Are Assured

State workers have also been told that the building will not be reopened until maximum PCB standards are met, even if it means cleaning the building several times. The state offers a free blood test to anyone who suspects they might have been exposed, and cleanup workers receive periodic examinations.

Nevertheless, there is nervousness. "My friends half-joke with me that I should be decontaminated," said a secretary who worked in the State Transportation Department.

The suspicion extends to the workers doing the cleanup. Vincent J. Brigante, director of operations for New England Pollution Control, who has spent his career commuting to oil spills, tank-truck accidents and other environmental disasters, says his men meet hostility at their motel and in restaurants.

He says he was getting onto the elevator in City Hall the other day when two young women already inside recognized him. They stepped out, refusing to ride with him.

"It's fear of the unknown," said Mr. Brigante. "I guess I can't really blame them."

Monsanto Co. Lends Analyst To Reagan

Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Among the many new Reagan administration aides who surfaced in the many briefings on the new economic plan was A. Nicholas Filippello of St. Louis, on loan from the Monsanto Co.

Filippello, whose regular job is director of economic analysis at Monsanto, showed up Wednesday to help pass out documents at a White House breakfast news briefing by Murray L. Weiden sum, also of St. Louis, chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisers.

Weidenbaum, a Washington University economist, said he had brought Filippello along to Washington for about two months as a special consultant on macro-economic matters, which involve the economy as a whole as distinguished from individual industries or firms.

"Essentially, he is pinch-hitting until I recruit the two other members of the council," Weidenbaum told the Post-Dispatch. "Monsanto will be picking up his salary. He will not deal with budgetary or regulatory matters for obvious reasons."

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