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Hazardous Waste Action

1407

SACRAMENTO (UPI) — Land disposal of liquid hazardous wastes containing high concentrations of PCBs, strong acids and heavy metals will be prohibited in California starting next year under action announced Tuesday by the state.

Health Services Director Peter Rank said new regulations will require that such hazardous wastes be recycled or treated, either at treatment facilities of major companies or at several off-site treatment facilities.

The land disposal ban marks the second stage of a two-year phaseout of land disposal of many highly toxic hazardous wastes in California under regulations prepared last year by the Department of Health Services.

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Cal State workers upset over PCB

1407

By Phil LaVelle
Staff writer

HAYWARD — A union representing about 300 workers at California State University, Hayward, wants employees moved from work areas illuminated by fluorescent lights in fixtures containing about a tablespoon of PCB each.

A union spokeswoman said Wednesday a grievance will be filed to try to get the workers moved away from the fixtures, some of which have leaked polychlorinated biphenyls.

The California State Employees Association grievance will also ask that the university pay for medical examinations for workers — including a pregnant custodian — who say their skin came in contact with the suspected carcinogen.

Gale Pemberton, president of CSEA Chapter 306, said aging fluorescent light fixtures at Cal State have ballasts that leak PCB "eight to 12 times a year."

Moreover, Ms. Pemberton said, the leaks are often cleaned up by custodians unaware of the hazards of PCB or of safe cleanup procedures.

Federal Environmental Protection Agency guidelines say workers cleaning up PCB leaks from fluorescent light fixtures must wear protective gloves.

"One custodian, Trini Vega, who is pregnant, has probably cleaned up after PCB spills barehanded six or eight times during her pregnancy," Ms. Pemberton said.

University officials did not know the concentration of PCB in the light fixtures.

Ms. Pemberton further charged that the university has no set procedures for cleaning up after spills and has taken a cavalier approach in handling worker complaints.

"The whole attitude of the administration to this problem seems to be that they view our concerns as so much emotionalism," Ms. Pemberton said. "We consider it an urgent health and safety hazard."

University spokesman Darrell Gray said, however, there are only two or three spills of PCB from fluorescent light fixtures at Cal State each year. They are cleaned up by staff electricians trained in spotting PCB, he said.

Gray said custodians aren't supposed to tackle PCB spills because they aren't trained in PCB cleanup procedures.

"They're not supposed to be cleaning the stuff up," he said. "They're supposed to report it to their superiors, who call the electricians. If they are cleaning it up, they're doing so mistakenly."

Most fluorescent light fixtures manufactured before 1979 contain small concentrated amounts — no more than a tablespoon — of PCB, according to the state Department of Health Services. According to doctors with that agency, little is known about the long-term effects of brief exposure to small amounts of PCB.

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