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PCB leaks identified in report

1407
100 transformers leaking
in S.F., none in Oakland

By Patricia Radin
The Tribune

SAN FRANCISCO — One hundred of Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s 855 PCB-cooled transformers in this city have shown signs of leaks but all 144 in downtown Oakland are sound, PG&E spokesmen said Wednesday.

PG&E spokesman Tony Ledwell said the utility company inspected all 999 of its big network transformers this summer and made note of those that showed signs of leaking. The units are inspected every three months, he said.

"I don't think this finding is out of the ordinary," he said of the most recent inspection. "Some of these (transformers) are old."

An internal PG&E report listing the results of this summer's inspection was obtained by Local 87 of the Service Employees International Union.

The utility contends there is no danger to the public because the oily PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are isolated in concrete-lined vaults. The average transformer contains 500 gallons of the fluid and some are as large as a small room.

"What we classified as a 'leak' was not necessarily something spilling onto the floor," Ledwell said. "It's anything unusual including moisture or discoloration. If a transformer is leaking excessively, it's repaired immediately."

Used since 1949

Used in PG&E equipment since 1949, PCB is irritating to some people's skin and is tainted with deadly dioxins. If burned at temperatures between 700 and 900 degrees, it forms compounds that are suspected of causing liver damage and cancer.

The utility plans by 1988 to replace all of its PCB-filled units with transformers that are insulated with mineral oil. In Oakland, replacement of the first 29 units will begin in December, said PG&E spokesman Harry Arnott.

First to be removed are units in locations that city and utility officials consider most likely to threaten public safety.

According to the list released by Local 87, three of the leaks were found at the utility's own annex on Beale Street and another was discovered across the street at the Bechtel Building. Two leaks were found among the four transformers at St. Francis Hospital and four were found at BART's Embarcadero Station. Pacific Telephone headquarters had a leaky unit and so did the Federal Building, the list says. Six problems were discovered in a transformer at the Hilton.

All of the network transformers are in downtown locations because such machines serve only high-density areas.