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Times-Herald/David Pacheco

Robert Bosch of PG&E photographs the PCB-contaminated site on Chabot Road.

Worker digs up PCBs

By MICHAEL McCALL
Times-Herald staff writer

VALLEJO — A worker digging up scrap metal behind an abandoned salvage yard discovered an "unusually large" accumulation of PCB-contaminated electrical transformers late last week, according to officials from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and the California Health Department.

Twenty-one transformers — all leaking toxic PCBs — have since been dug from the ground behind a building formerly leased by Vallejo Iron Works at 227 Chabot Road.

The government banned PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, in 1977 as a suspected cause of cancer, birth defects and other health problems. The chemical had gained wide use as a lubricant and coolant in machinery and electrical equipment before the ban.

Dr. James Stratton, chief of the Health Department's Environmental Toxic Epidemiology unit, cautioned people not to overreact to a PCB scare.

"It is not all that dangerous unless it is ingested or someone is subjected to heavy exposure," Stratton said. The substance is "dangerous basically because of its durability" and attraction to body tissues, allowing the toxic material to accumulate while stored in the body.

A symptom of a dangerous level of PCB poisoning is "chloracne," Stratton said, which can be detected by a reddish rash appearing on the skin.

Excavation of the grounds was halted Tuesday as state Hazardous Waste Management workers con

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ducted tests to determine the extent of the contamination to the area.

Preliminary tests revealed no "imminent danger" to Lakeside Manor residents living adjacent to the property, said John Blasco, assistant regional manager of Hazardous Waste Management branch of the state health department.

PG&E tests have shown the contamination of the liquid to vary from 20 percent to 1 percent, said Jan Stewart, a press spokeswoman for the utility company.

"We don't really know the extent of the contamination," Stewart said, adding that the company also does not know how the equipment got to the site, or why it had been buried.

Less than half of the approximately 20-square-yard lot has been excavated and officials expect to find more transformers when digging reconvenes.

A hazardous management worker at the site Tuesday said tests are now being conducted to determine if any of the toxic substance has seeped into ground water below the site.

The land is considered part of state Route 37 right of way and is owned by the California Department of Transportation. The department evicted the renters of the property April 1 because of plans to widen the state highway.

John Holt, a regional manager for PG&E, said his company is removing the transformers "in the interest of public safety." Holt believes the state is responsible for the cleanup because it owns the property.

"But we have the ability to handle it so we started working on it," Holt said, noting that the equipment had been buried there "a good many years." His company has no record of selling scrapped transformers to Vallejo Iron Works, he said.

Vallejo Iron Works had leased the property for 13 years.

PG&E had commonly disposed of old transformers by selling them to salvage yards before the 1977 ban. Since then, the company has discarded the equipment in specific disposal sites.

The transformers dug from the lot probably will be collected at a nearby PG&E lot and then transported together to the company's toxic dump site in Union City, said Blasco.

Caltrans contacted PG&E late last week after Lynn Gillett, a self-employed salvage worker, discovered the contaminated equipment while hauling material from the abandoned iron works.

Gillett said he had been "pulling out quite a few" of the transformers before his son noticed a small sign warning of the dangers attached to one of the large, gray objects. At the time, Gillett said he and his son were covered with the black lubricant.

"I've been contaminated by it — definitely. Everyone around here has," he said, indicating the residents living on neighboring Pepper Drive.

Lloyd Murray of 304 Pepper Drive agrees with Gillett. The 64-year-old Murray, whose backyard fence abuts the lot that has been roped-off for excavation, retired two years ago when recurring backaches and nausea kept him from working regularly.

"I've been back in that lot many times. I've seen little neighborhood kids running around back there," he said. "I feel awful about the whole thing, everybody around here does. It smells real bad and has for a long time."

Workers in yellow-colored protective gear and gloves canvassed Pepper Drive Monday telling residents about the dangers of the cordoned-off site, warning them to stay away.

Gillett also said Fred Coffman, owner of Vallejo Iron Works, used oil siphoned from the lot to clean tools and engines and as a lubricant in his truck.

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