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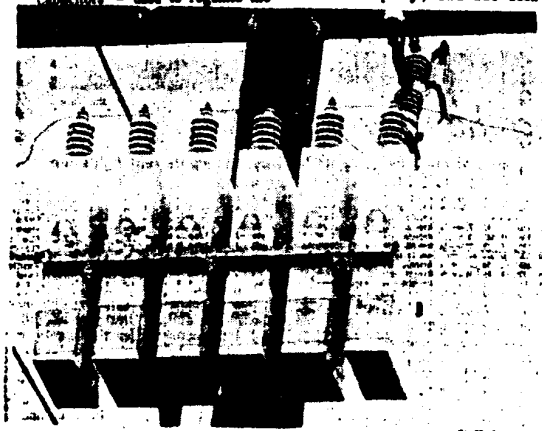
Alabama Power equipment uses PCB

A jolt of juice isn't the only thing dangerous on a utility pole or at an Alabama Power Company substation.

Capacitors — used to regulate the flow of electricity — contain several gallons of a cancer-causing compound.

The compound is called PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) and has been linked to cancer and birth defects in lab animals and skin and internal disorders in humans. The compound is used as an insulator.



Staff photo

Capacitors like these contain cancer causing PCB

APC and utilities across the nation face the problem of getting rid of damaged or worn capacitors filled with PCB. The disposal problem attracted attention in North Carolina last summer when truckers illegally dumped about 30,000 gallons of PCB-laced oil along roads in the eastern and central parts of the state.

An APC spokesman says leaky capacitors aren't much of a problem and new ones use a different insulating compound.

"There is always the possibility of a rupture, but the design of the capacitor inhibits the loss of PCB. It's not like a tank where if you punched a hole, the PCB would leak out," Bruce Gilliland said.

"I know the manufacture of PCB is being halted and that construction (of capacitors) is moving to other type of material. As the manufacturers move away from PCBs, we'll go to new equipment as it becomes available and as our needs dictate."

But APC still has to dispose of worn capacitors filled with PCB.

"Worn or damaged capacitors are taken to a designated interim storage facility and then taken to a federally approved dump," Gilliland said.

Emelle, Ala., in Sumter County, is the site of one of seven dumps approved by the Environmental Protection Agency for PCB.

EPA officials say recent attention to the PCB problem ignores the fact that massive amounts of the chemical are already in the environment.

A 1977 EPA report estimates American manufacturers, primarily Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Corp., produced 1.4 billion pounds of PCBs between 1930 and 1975.

Some 60 percent of the chemical is still in use, primarily in electrical capacitors and transformers.

But PCBs are also in household items such as carbonless copy paper, fluorescent lights, television sets, air conditioners and microwave ovens.

And about 150 million pounds are in air, water and soil. Another 290 million pounds are in landfills and dumps. Less than 5 percent has been destroyed.

As a Duke Power Company official in North Carolina said: "There's just no end to it."

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