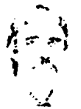
SPOKANE, WASH.
THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW
D. 73 021 224 173,978

NOV 4 1979

Dangerous PCB geek still running free



Chris Peck

Circus clerks — wildlife performers who literally bite the heads off chickens — couldn't possibly match the performance of PCBs this year.

Since June more than 770,000 chickens in Montana, Idaho and 15 other states have been destroyed following a chance meeting, with the most exotic geek known as polychlorinated biphenyls.

This technological geek looks and like a circus clown but a thick, heavy-like oil.

For nearly 50 years a sturdy, PCB-based liquid called Askarel has been sold under 7 years on brand names as a friend of man, a protector of human life.

Askarel (60 percent PCBs) was first promoted in 1930 by Monsanto Chemical Co. as a wonder substance good for its cooling and noncombustible qualities. Best of all, Askarel was inert — it would never break down or disappear.

Since its introduction, American utilities and industry have packed more than 400 million pounds of Askarel into 4 million electrical transformers and millions more capacitors.

It was a technological marvel, this stuff Askarel worked spectacularly as a liquid insulator of high-tension current electrical equipment.

Anywhere an electrical fire could pose a hazard to people, an Askarel-filled transformer or capacitor was used. It protected man and beast from electrical fire.

But in 1929 Askarel became a geek of the first order.

An Askarel-filled transformer sprang a leak at the Pierce Packing Co. in Billings, Montana in May.

About 200 gallons of the yellowish honey leaked out of the nine-year-old transformer and somehow filtered into Pierce Packing's chicken feed processing system.

The contaminated feed or chickens went to 17 states and two foreign countries. Routine federal testing of eggs and chickens began picking up dangerously high concentrations of PCB in feed stuff bound for human consumption.

That set off the federal alarm bells, which triggered the mass destruction of contaminated chickens and eggs.

Beginning in 1966 scientists had worried about human consumption of PCBs after the chemical accidentally contaminated a vat of cooking oil in Japan.

Hundreds of Japanese using the PCB-tainted oil developed skin and liver disease, enlarged livers, dizziness and a blood imbalance.

Further tests with PCBs in monkeys and seals linked the chemical to cancer and infertility.

These were the scientific facts that triggered the great Chicken Massacre of 1979. Losses due to the summer's Askarel spill have passed $5 million.

While the feathers of nearly a million dead chickens have settled, the problem of how to deal with PCB is anything but solved.

Thousands of gallons of the PCB-based liquid Askarel, the same liquid that leaked out of the Pierce Packing transformer, remain in close proximity to the human food chain and the people of Washington, Idaho and Montana.

Technological PCB-filled geeks, simple electrical transformers and capacitors, hang on power poles along roadsides, and sit in factories and public buildings.

Despite efforts by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Northwest utilities to identify and remove these potentially hazardous devices, the process is both slow and inexact.

The problem is this: Since 1932, PCB-filled transformers and capacitors have been used without anyone considering them hazardous.

For years, transformers were bought and sold without records being kept. The Askarel was drained and sold or mixed with other oils without thinking.

Capacitors — electrical devices used to maximize power transfers — were routinely discarded in city dumps and junk yards when they had outlived their usefulness. No one knew any better.

The proliferation of PCB has taken on frightening dimensions over the years.

In 1968 alone, Washington Water Power estimated its system included about 6,000 Askarel-filled capacitors. Each contained an average of two gallons of the toxic liquid insulation.

Today, the PCB geek hunters are beating the bushes for the remains of 40 years of misunderstanding about Askarel-filled electrical equipment.

Kaiser Aluminum, Spokane's largest employer, has located 150 Askarel-filled capacitors this year at its Trentwood rolling mill. And the company has found some transformers similar to the one that leaked at Pierce Packing.

"This stuff has come back to haunt us," Kaiser electrical foreman Jim Stroupe said recently.

For Washington Water Power, the haunting ghost of Askarel filled equipment looms much larger.

By the end of 1979, half of the 6,000 PCB-filled capacitors in the WWP system will be removed from service.

But that leaves 3,000 capacitors and 15 Askarel transformers still to be removed.

"We only have seven large Askarel transformers, thank God," WWP standards engineer Curran Dempsey said a few days ago.

But these potential disasters rest in critical spots.

Four of the company's Long Lake power plant on the Spokane River. Each of these contains about 600 gallons of PCB liquid.

The utility also owns Askarel transformers at the Dalkena Wafer City [illegible] and at the Cold Creek landfill receiving point in Ostrelly, Wash.

"We are taking them down as fast as we can," engineer Dempsey said, "and we don't want to panic people."

For the record, Washington Water Power tries to keep the PCB problem in perspective.

The main threat to persons who come in contact with PCB is possible skin burns, engineer Dempsey said. "All you have to worry about is that you wash it off as soon as you can."

Still, the utility has drafted strict internal guidelines on how line crews should handle leaking PCB equipment. Goggles, overalls and boots are required.

And, before linemen go to the old PCB capacitors they also must read a company warning.

It says:

Frequent contact with Askarel or Askarel fumes may cause skin rash, damage to liver function and possibly even cancer.

Yet the real problem with the geek known as Askarel rests not with the capacitors and transformers utilities know about, but with the electrical equipment the company is not.

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