PCB Waiting Game Grows Tense

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Wayne Darling, 32, and his wife, Marie, 29, are trying hard not to panic.

The prospect that they and their year-old child Matthew may have been contaminated by the dangerous chemical, PCB, seems too bizarre to believe. But Saturday, all they could do was play the waiting game — waiting until officials from the Colorado Health Department have completed tests on Mrs. Darling's breast milk and the chickens on the couple's Lafayette farm — chickens which have provided the couple with their breakfast eggs.

Their nightmare began Tuesday night when they watched a public television broadcast which detailed the cancer and birth defect risks inherent in PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl). Darling has known for two years that the 17 barrels not 200 feet from his home were filled with PCB, but he hadn't known of the danger they presented.

THE BARRELS apparently were left there by a relative of the former tenant after he got them from a food processing company. There have been reports that the relative, Kenneth Sutton, either intended using the black, oily liquid as a wood preserver on fenceposts or to dampen the dirt on nearby roads. Sutton couldn't be reached for comment.

A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official said only one of the 17 barrels still has its original seal. The other 16 all have been opened, the PCB is at various levels inside and at least one of the barrels has leaked. The official, Robert W. Harding, said it isn't known what happened to the PCB that apparently was removed from the other barrels.

Darling said his chickens have had access to the area where they were but that he hasn't seen them there often.

Both Darling and his wife said their main concern was for their son. But Mrs. Darling said there has been no evidence so far that her breast milk has been contaminated.

"He's been the most perfect child that ever lived," Mrs. Darling said, her voice quivering with fright. "He's never been sick a day in his life. We're just trying to stay calm until we know for sure."

DARLING, a vegetarian who is a member of the Cousteau Society, an environmental group, and the Union of Concerned Scientists, a group which serves a "watchdog" role over nuclear energy, says the experience has deepened his distrust of chemicals and those who make them.

"I blame the company that makes that stuff before knowing what it can do to the environment," he said.

The company, Monsanto Agricultural Products Co., couldn't be reached Saturday, but Darling said a representative of the company told him that the chemical couldn't be destroyed because of its chemical makeup.

Also, Darling said, state officials have said they can't move it until they find some way and some place to store it.

"I don't know what to say," Darling said. "I'm shocked and mistrustful of chemical companies. They make the stuff and [illegible] have any responsibility for it. I don't say I'm not scared, but most of the people who have been out here say it doesn't seem to be leaking much, so that's encouraging."

Darling said he plans to "make noise until it gets moved," or, if it isn't moved, to move off the farm himself.

For Mrs. Darling's part, she says she just feels that the family was "a bunch of innocent suckers."

SOIL SAMPLES taken so far indicate "really significant" amounts of PCB in the area around the barrels, Harding said. At some point, he added, that soil should be removed.

Samples taken from the barnyard area about 50 to 100 feet away indicate lesser amounts, and a decision will be made later on what to do about that soil, Harding said.

Harding said it isn't known whether any blame should be assessed in the matter. The dangers of PCB weren't well-known 10 years ago, but that in the last couple of years the regulations governing its use have become stricter and more publicized. With few exceptions, the manufacture of PCB has been banned by the EPA since May 1979, Harding said.

Darling said he knew the barrels contained chemicals ever since he and his wife moved onto the farm about five years ago, but that it wasn't until he wrote to the Monsanto company two years ago that he became aware that the barrels contained PCB.

He said he remembers it as a Monsanto salesman told him the chemicals were "dangerous," but that he doesn't recall the salesman giving him the exact nature of the potential danger, which he says he discovered from watching the television program last week.

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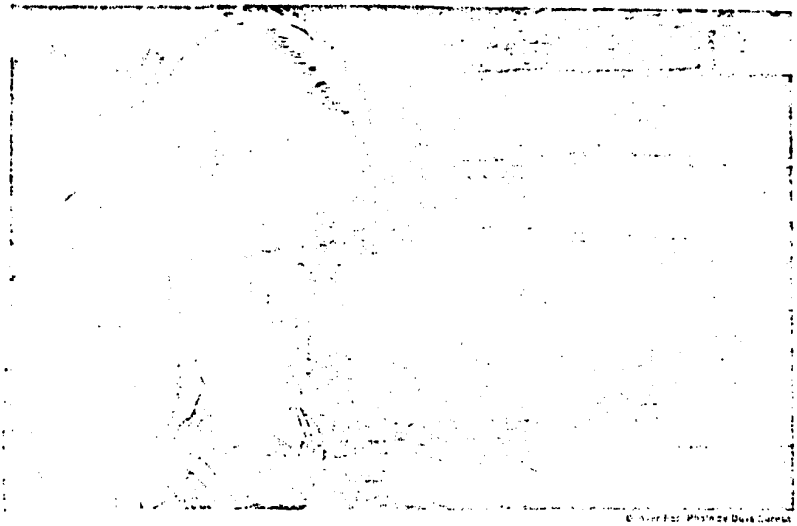

WAYNE DARLING PLAYS WITH HIS SON, MATTHEW, JUST OUTSIDE QUARANTINED AREA OF FARM
He learned Tuesday that the 17 barrels of the chemical PCB could represent a threat to his family.