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Health Agencies Probing Rohr's PCB Handling

RIVERSIDE (AP) — An aerospace contractor's method of storage for a suspected cancer-causing chemical is under investigation following admissions by company officials that unlawfully high levels of the chemical were kept on its premises for more than a year.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Occupational Health and Safety Administration are both looking into Rohr Industries Inc.'s handling of PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls.

If found in violation of state and federal regulations regarding the chemical, Rohr could face heavy fines.

PCBs, used in heat transfer fluids because of their stability at high temperatures, have been found to cause cancer and sterility and impair liver functions in laboratory animals, and Rohr workers say they fear they may suffer health problems because of exposure to the substance.

The compounds enter the body through breathing, eating and absorption through skin and eyes and are grouped among the most toxic when burned. Aside from their long range effects, they can immediately cause a severe skin irritation called "chloracne" and darkening of the skin.

EPA regulations drawn up under the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act banned manufacture of PCB substances — those containing 50 parts per million or more of the compounds — in 1977. Handling rules aimed at forcing the chemical's gradual withdrawal were issued in May 1979.

The rules permit use of PCBs in vented heat-transfer systems, such as the one at Rohr, until 1984, but required that the fluid in the system be tested for PCB content no later than Nov. 1, 1979. If the test showed a concentration of 50 ppm or more, the system had to be drained and refilled within six months with a solution of less than 50 ppm.

Rohr tested the Monsanto Corp. thermal oil it uses in a section of the plant where materials are bonded together in March 1979 and found 2,300 ppm PCBs. Under the EPA regulations, the company should have drained the system in September 1979, but did not do so until November 1980.

"We apparently didn't start as early as we should have, given all the things we had to do," said Jacqueline S. Jenerette, manager of public relations for the Chula Vista, Cal.-based company.

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