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PCB bill remains in limbo

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Poisonous PCBs were sprayed all over a parking lot in Clackamas southeast of Portland last week when an electric capacitor exploded near a Safeway warehouse.

A crew from a firm called Western Environmental Services dug up contaminated soil and pavement, sealed the material in steel drums and will deposit them in a landfill this week at Arlington, the state's only disposal site for hazardous wastes.

The cleanup took place under the supervision of the Department of Environmental Quality despite no state laws on the books that declare PCBs an environmentally hazardous waste.

PCBs are polychlorinated biphenyls, nearly indestructible chemical compounds usually in the form of colorless fluids. PCBs are used primarily as dielectric fluids, or nonconductors of direct electric current, in heat transfer systems enclosed in high-voltage capacitors and transformers.

Scientific evidence indicates that PCBs can mutate genes and perhaps cause cancer. Jim Swenson, DEQ public affairs officer, said they are most dangerous in the food cycle, particularly in fish, because they accumulate to levels toxic to primates.

Monsanto Corp., chief manufacturer of PCBs, has been phasing them out since 1971 and will reach that goal by the end of this year. PCBs previously appeared in hand soaps, carbonless duplicating paper, asphalt and as plasticizers and sealers.

Portland General Electric Co., owner of the capacitor that exploded in Clackamas, has $4 million in capacitors and transformers in Oregon, says Rep. Roger Martin, R-Lake Oswego.

Pacific Power & Light Co. owns $5 million in capacitors and transformers that contain PCBs. Other large-scale users are the Bonneville Power Administration, Salem Electric and big industry, such as lumber and aluminum companies.

Martin, House minority leader, introduced a bill in the Oregon Legislature that would order a three-year phaseout of manufacture, sale or use of PCBs in decreasing concentrations.

Under HB2030, by 1980 PCBs could not be used in concentrations greater than 100 parts of PCB per 1,000,000 parts of the product, such as dielectric fluid.

Martin's bill also would require labeling of products containing PCBs after July 1 and filing with the DEQ a written notice of intent to use products containing PCBs.

But the bill is in limbo because Congress passed the 1976 Toxic Substances Act, which provided for regulation of PCBs by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA is expected to issue rules by July that would limit allowable concentrations of PCBs to 500 ppm (parts per million). Martin's bill would allow concentrations of 250,000 ppm in 1978 and 1,000 ppm in 1979 before becoming even stricter than anticipated federal regulations by allowing only 100 ppm in 1980.

Rep. Nancie Fadeley, D-Eugene, said Friday she's not inclined to do anything with HB2030 because tougher federal standards would preempt Martin's proposed PCB levels.

In addition, HB2030 says the Environmental Quality Commission eventually could order replacement of capacitors and transformers in Oregon that contain PCBs.

Rep. Fadeley said Martin's electric company sells such equipment. Martin said he sells only transformers and that the fluid in transformers can be drained and replaced with a PCB substitute, such as Dow Chemical's silicone fluid.

Rep. Fadeley said the committee will hear testimony today on disposal of hazardous wastes.

The DEQ already has authority to classify PCBs as environmentally hazardous wastes by administrative rule. But Ernie Schmidt, head of DEQ's hazardous waste division, said those hearings probably won't get under way until late this year.

Rep. Fadeley said her committee will decide after hearings whether legislative action is needed to deal with PCBs in view of federal legislation and the DEQ's existing authority.

Meanwhile, DEQ already is treating PCBs as environmentally hazardous waste.

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