Try Bacteria Against PCBs—Citizens Panel

WARRENTON (AP) — Warren County citizens want the state to consider using bacteria to degrade toxic PCBs spilled along North Carolina roadsides before resorting to a county landfill.

Warren County Citizens Concerned About PCB recently issued a press statement saying that an Allentown, Pa., firm has successfully treated polychlorinated biphenyls spilled in South Carolina.

However, South Carolina officials were cautious about endorsing the method, which has not been approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A test plot being administered by Polybac Corp. at the company's expense showed promising results only after a 10-week test was extended another five to six weeks, said Louis Shaw, chief of the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Bureau of Water Pollution Control.

Although there are signs that the chemical is being gradually degraded by bacteria, Shaw said it was too early to tell if the method could work on PCBs spilled along 210 miles of North Carolina roadsides in 1978.

"Every day they go in and till this plot," he said Thursday. "They mix up the dirt, and they may just be mixing bad dirt with good dirt, giving the appearance that the concentration of PCB is being lowered."

Because of the meticulous care given the test site, it may not be practical to apply it to a wider area, Shaw said.

"They're looking at the test plot daily," he said. "The bacteria are being pampered. It's ideal conditions."

Still, groups opposing the PCB landfill near Afton want the state to await final results before moving contaminated soil — scheduled to begin Aug. 23.

Shaw agreed it might be worth a try.

"We felt like it was certainly worth the time that would be spent at least examining the situation," he said.

However, unless the EPA approves the bacterial treatment, North Carolina can't put off opening the landfill, said Bryant Haskins, a spokesman for the N.C. Department of Human Resources.

So far, no techniques have proven feasible, said Al Smith, chief of the Emergency and Remedial Response Branch of the EPA in Atlanta.

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