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Unconfirmed report says N.Y. firm suspect in PCB case

From News Dispatches

A spokesman for the state Justice Department said Tuesday he could neither confirm nor deny a report in the Raleigh Times that a small waste disposal firm in New York was a prime suspect in the dumping of the poisonous chemical PCB along state highways.

The Times said in its Tuesday edition that the company, which was not identified, was under investigation by SBI agents and New York State Police.

The Times reported sources close to the investigation as saying the company operates three or four tanker trucks that are capable of picking up and dumping liquid chemical wastes such as PCBs.

Trucks owned by the firm are known to have picked up PCBs from Ward Transformer Co. Inc. near Raleigh, a firm that buys, sells and rents electric transformers in which PCB is used as an insulating material.

The Times said two state police officers in western New York State have been assigned to the case and are searching for a tanker truck owned by the New York firm.

The owners of the company were questioned last week by three SBI agents who traveled to New York, The Times said.

The Times also quoted sources as saying arrests in the case could be imminent. State and federal law enforcement officials are awaiting the results of chemical "fingerprint" tests comparing the PCB dumped along the highways with substances found in the trucks owned by the New York company.

PCB, an abbreviation for polychlorinated biphenyl, is a suspected cancer-causing agent. Its use will be illegal beginning next year. State officials have said it was dumped along about 370 miles of North Carolina highway surrounding the Raleigh area. Most of the spills occurred earlier this month, but one was reported in late July.

State officials have announced an $800,000 program to chemically neutralize the chemical, cover it in asphalt and scrape up the mixture along with contaminated dirt. Work on the cleanup began last weekend.

Spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture said Tuesday that tests had revealed minute traces of PCB in tobacco taken from farms adjoining spill areas.

Dr. William Cobb, state chemist with the department, said the trace amounts appear to offer no health hazard. Cobb's report said tests by his office revealed concentrations of the chemical to be approximately one part per million parts of tobacco in plants taken from the roadside and less than half that amount 50 to 70 feet in the field.

Dr. J.M. MacCormick, chief of the state Communicable Disease Branch, said results of the first battery of tests performed on persons suspected of exposure to the PCBs were inconclusive. MacCormack said the first tests, which measured liver functions, will not be examined until the results of a second test are known. He said results of blood tests are not expected until late next week.

MONS 011391