Doctors say PCB on roadsides poses no threat

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HALIFAX — Two doctors who have treated patients exposed to heavy concentrations of PCBs testified Friday that PCB-laced oil dumped on North Carolina roadsides last summer posed no threat to humans or animals and should be left where it was.

The doctors testified as defense attorneys for Robert E. "Buck" Ward Jr. of Raleigh rested their case in Ward's trial on charges of being an accessory and conspirator in the PCB dumpings.

The jury is expected to begin deliberation in Halifax County Superior Court Monday. If convicted, Ward faces up to 22 years in prison.

Dr. Leonard Goldwater, a Chatham County physician who has consulted with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and other governmental agencies on environmental problems, said the amount of PCB spilled on the roadsides was not harmful to human or animal life.

The PCB incident has been blown out of proportion by the news media, Goldwater said. He said he had examined thousands of people who had suffered no ill effects from PCB exposure.

Asked if the spilled chemical could cause cancer, Goldwater said, "The probability is so remote that everyone should forget it. The harm done by frightening everyone is much worse than the long-term chemical threat."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has said that laboratory tests showed that PCB caused cancer in laboratory animals. Earlier this week, that agency rejected a proposal that the PCB-contaminated soil be left along the roadsides because scientists feared the chemical might spread to humans as the soil eroded.

Dr. R. Emmett Kelly, a retired physician for Monsanto Chemical Co., agreed with Goldwater's assessment. From 1946 to 1975, he said, he regularly examined Monsanto employees who were "practically bathing in this stuff" and found no health problems except for a type of acne.

Monsanto, which was the sole manufacturer of PCB, stopped making the chemical, Kelly said, because "If you had high enough concentrations of PCB in a stream going into the ocean, it could get into the food chain and eventually cause hormonal change."

In sufficient quantities, Kelly said, the chemical could cause reproductive problems in animals — "a lack of ability to put the eggshell on the egg."

But the amount dumped beside North Carolina roads was not significant, he said.

Goldwater and Kelly disputed testimony earlier in the week by Dr. Renate Kimbrough, who said she found in laboratory experiments that rats and mice developed liver cancer and other disorders after they were fed PCB.

Based on those studies, she thought the PCB spilled on North Carolina roads "could cause harm" to humans and animals. She is a pathologist-toxocologist with the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Goldwater said news media descriptions of PCB as toxic might be a misrepresentation.

Any substance taken in large enough quantities can be harmful, he said.

Kelly was asked what would happen if PCB were injected into people. "I consider PCB to be an industrial chemical," he said, "and you don't give them to people."

Three New York men have pleaded guilty and are awaiting sentencing for draining the PCB oil from a specially rigged truck onto the roadsides. Robert J. Burns and his sons, Timothy and Randall, were prosecution witnesses against Ward.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is the main ingredient of fluid used to insulate against heat and high voltage in electrical transformers.