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$120 Million Suit Looms In Power Capacitor Blast, PCB Peril Here

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By Mary Beth Goodman
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More than three months after an exploding Southern California Edison Co. capacitor sprayed a potentially dangerous chemical into three yards on Pioneer Boulevard, the biological nightmare still continues for a trio of Whittier families: Martin and Aubre Purcell.

Their son, Craig Purcell, and his pregnant wife, Carolyn.

Jose Ortiz, his pregnant wife, Rosa, and their two children, two-year-old Darlene and five-year-old Joseph.

All are grimly waiting to see what effect the polychorinated biphenyl (PCB) that coated their yards will have on the health of their families and unborn children.

The three families have prepared a $120 million law suit against Edison and the Los Angeles County district attorney is investigating Edison's role in the Fourth of July accident.

According to John Lynch, a lawyer for the consumer and environment protection division of the district attorney's office, this is the first such investigation into the handling of PCB, a non-conductive coolant used to control the temperature of capacitors.

The district attorney's office is attempting to determine if Edision violated the Calfornia Health and Safety Code. Lynch was unwilling to comment further until the investigation is completed.

Edison officials also refused to comment on the incident.

But the victims of the chemical spill are more than willing to talk about the problem. All frankly admit that they are worried.

"We are still scared," Ortiz said. "We think about it all of the time because we can't go into the backyard.

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"We don't even feel safe in the house."

The families may have reason for concern. Recent soil tests reveal the yards are still contaminated with unacceptable levels of PCB from the summer spill.

The substance is listed as a potential cause of cancer and severe liver damage.

Even more terrifying for the families is PCB's suspected link with birth defects.

Both Rosa Ortiz and Carolyn Purcell were in their first trimester of pregnancy when the initial contamination occurred.

However, blood samples taken from the residents of the three homes have revealed no measurable contamination.

The soil contains 99.8 parts per

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Power Pole Blast

Families' Nightmare

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million of PCB, acccording to tests done by the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The percentage is nearly twice the acceptable level set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Although Edison dispatched work crews to clean the yards after the accident, the Los Angeles County Health Department required the company to send out a second cleanup crew. The continued presence of contamination will probably require a third cleanup, according to health department officials.

Approximately 130,000 capacitors containing PCB are still in use by Southern California Edision. The capacitors, utilized in clusters, are operating in 8,000 different locations.

In 1979 the Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of PCB in all but completely sealed containers. The chemical was once produced in this country by the Monsanto Corp., but is no longer made here.

The PCB capacitators still in use on utility lines continue to create problems.

Edison estimates that at least one capacitor containing PCB explodes *each week.*

The three Whittier homes have been up for sale since the accident, but not one potential buyer has come out to look at the houses, said Larry Bruce, a Santa Ana lawyer who will represent the families in the civil suit.

Prospective buyers must be told about the PCB and once they are, no one is interested, Bruce said.

"These houses are worth nothing. If the houses only cost $1,000 would you move in to them ?"

The law suit will allege both fraud and negligence, he said.

He charges that Edison willfully chose not to replace a 25-year-old capacitor which contained PCB, even though officials knew the substance was dangerous.

"Edison replaces capacitors when they blow and spray PCB," he said. "Once this thing happened they chose to defraud them (the residents) and not tell them it was PCB."

The residents were told not to clean up the substance, that an Edison crew would do that, but not that it was dangerous, Bruce said.

No warning was issued about the potential chemical danger, he added.

According to Ortiz, he believed the Edison statements that the yard was safe and permitted his children to play in the area for a week until a Health Deparment official informed him of the danger.

"I am outraged at their (Edison's) behavior," Bruce said. "There is a policy not to inform people."

The Edison crew came out in the middle of the night in their decontamination suits to clean up the spill, even though the explosion occurred during the day, he said. Bruce alleged that the night clean-up was an attempt to conceal the work crew.

The law suit will seek $15 million in punitive damages per person, plus actual damages.

Edison sends clean-up crews out as soon as possible and makes no attempt to conceal their activity, said Dave Barron, an Edison spokesman.

It is also company policy to inform persons exposed to PCB of its dangers, he added and said Edison was one of the first power companies to develop clean-up crews for PCB.

The company has developed a switching device which is intended to shut down the capacitors before they blow, he said.

"We feel it is a prudent move because of the unavailability of replacement equipment," he said.

As the capacitors blow or are relocated they are replaced with *new ones which do not contain PCB,* he added.



HOME OWNER Martin Purcell points to soil in his backyard still contaminated with a toxic chemical following the July 4 explosion of a Southern California Edison capacitor. The explosion has prompted a $120 million law suit. (Daily News Photo)

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