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All eyes on us

World is watching cleanup at befouled office building

By LOIS FECTEAU

The contamination at the Binghamton State Office Building is receiving worldwide attention, John C. Egan, commissioner of the state Office of General Services, said yesterday in Binghamton.

"We're writing a new book here. This is the first situation where we're faced with an office building or a building of this size that's been faced with (contamination) . . . We're getting the attention of the world," he said.

Egan and other state officials came to Binghamton yesterday afternoon to answer questions about the state building's cleanup, which was halted last week because of the presence of two deadly toxins.

Egan said officials plan to clean and decontaminate the building with "super caution."

"This will be a landmark. We're talking about the unknown. We haven't been here before. It requires a new approach," Egan said.

Officials said the state health department will convene a panel of experts from all over the world to assess the situation and establish goals for the cleanup. The state then will accept competitive bids from private pollution-control firms.

"The criteria for the cleanup are being established now by the state health department and the Department of Environmental Conservation. We will take the firm that offers the best (plan), including the economic package," Egan said.

Cleanup operations will not resume in the building for at least two months, officials said.

"It will take about three weeks for the expert panel to convene and another three to six weeks for the bids," Egan said.

The state building has been closed since Feb. 5, when a produce electrical fire and explosion damaged a basement transformer, spreading 100 gallons of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) coolant throughout the room. The accident contaminated the entire 10-story building with toxic soot.

Last week the cleanup was halted indefinitely after officials learned the building also was contaminated with dioxin and dibenzofurans. These toxins are combustion by-products of the PCBs and are two of the most potent chemicals known to man. Dioxin is the deadly ingredient in Agent Orange, the defoliant used during the Vietnam War.

The commissioner said he believes transformers will be examined all over the world because of what happened in Binghamton.

"This type of coolant is widespread throughout the world. The Navy has 400,000 of this type of transformer, all with this type of coolant. My guess is now that the problem has come forward, technology will come forward. I believe newer insulation material will be developed . . . I expect we'll find the answers because of the Binghamton problem," Egan said.

Dr. Philip R. Taylor, a state health department epidemiologist, said the panel of world experts also will be asked how the state health department should monitor the cleanup.

"That is another question to be addressed. Testing is expensive and time-consuming."

Taylor said he is convinced the pollution in the state building is "a soot and contact problem, not an air problem."

The epidemiologist said the health department might allow some traces of contamination to be left in the building if the dioxin and dibenzofurans are just in the soot. To examine this, the health department will do a special three-week test.

"If this stuff is all bound up in the soot, we may not have the problem we think we have . . . That means once you get the soot, you get the problem. If this is true, then there's the potential for leaving small amounts, so potentially the threat for humans may not be so great," Taylor said.

Health officials admit that psychological factors as well as physical dangers will have to be evaluated before the building can be certified as safe to reoccupy.

In a related matter, Binghamton Mayor Alfred J. Libous yesterday called upon the state health department to test city hall and the surrounding area to see if any pollution is escaping from the state facility.

Taylor said the state health department will do reasonable testing, but said it is "out of the question" to do extensive dioxin and dibenzofuran sampling because of the cost and time involved.

Taylor said minute traces of dioxin probably were tracked out of the state building along with the PCBs during the initial cleanup. He said they did not present a health threat and probably were too small to measure.

"I think we can be quite confident that there is very little, if anything, getting out," Taylor said.

Meanwhile, several employees who work on the fourth floor of city hall are filing accident reports with the city because of possible exposure to the contamination.

"These will go into records in case a workman's comp should ever be filed. This is a safety factor because, down the road, the employees don't know what the effects of these chemicals might be on their bodies," said Richard J. Beam, information officer of Binghamton's Community Development Department.

Officials admit that during the initial cleanup some workers violated the sa[illegible] rules and apparently tramped trace[illegible] PCBs into the fourth floor, which [illegible] being used as the cleanup headquarte[illegible]

"The people up here are concerned [illegible] cause they are working here day in [illegible] out. Other than those who've been in [illegible] building, we're the ones if anyone's b[illegible] exposed. For two weeks, they were u[illegible] the facilities up here. We could see it [illegible] changing and everything and it was d[illegible] ing us crazy . . . The people up here [illegible] concerned and rightly so," Beam s[illegible] He said 30 people work on the fo[illegible] floor.

As they have previously, state offi[illegible] defended the initial cleanup proced[illegible] during yesterday's press conference.

"In my judgment, the present [illegible] were adequate. Perhaps we could [illegible] done some things differently, but [illegible] my judgment," Egan said.

"We think the procedures we're [illegible] are very good," said David K. Sok[illegible] the state Office of General Services [illegible] neer in charge of the clean[illegible]



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John C. Egan talks yesterd[illegible] about world attention focusing [illegible] cleanup of the State Office Buil[illegible] ing in Binghamton. Behind him [illegible] James E. Wahl, superintendent [illegible] the contaminated building.

Carey pooh-poohs tower's health hazards

By STEVE GRIMANN

...Hugh L. Carey unleashed an angry ...e against unions and local health officials ...erday in an effort to downplay dangers ... toxins in the Binghamton State Office ...ding.

...rey said in Albany yesterday he was will... to drink a glass of water containing the tox... and help vacuum the building now covered ... soot and ash.

"I offer, here and now, to walk into Binghamton, to any part of that building, and swallow an entire glass of PCBs and then run a mile afterwards, all right?" Carey said.

The governor's office said Carey has no current plans to visit Binghamton.

"Look, that's a sorry situation," Carey said, gesturing in a way to show disgust. "I hate to say it, but somebody went amok in the Binghamton condition.

"I'm telling you, these things become overblown," he said. "Now we have to satisfy the unions which can withold its services until they are well satisfied."

The governor said the special blue-ribbon panel that will meet in New York on April 3 was being formed solely to "satisfy those who are going to work there is no risk."

Carey spoke only of the polychlorinated biphenyls, PCBs, and did not mention deadly dioxins tetrachlorodibenzofuran or the newest toxin — tetrachlorobiphenylene found in the soot and ash that infiltrated the building after a fire one month ago today.

His offer to drink a glass of water drew laughs from reporters and cringes from the state health officials and his own staff, who hustled the governor out of the room immediatly after his comments.

But his comments angered local union officials, stunned cleanup workers, alarmed health officials and prompted an Endicott radio station to invite Carey to make good on his promise.

Without mentioning his name, Carey blamed Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, the Broome County health commissioner, for distorting the dangers of the contamination.

"I'd like to meet that local health officer," Carey said.

Schecter said last night he, too, would like to meet Carey and spend a half hour explaining the situation and the potential dangers.

"Governor Carey must have a tremendous sense of humor," Schecter said. "You don't say you're going to drink PCBs unless you mean it as a joke.

"I think he's kicking off his new substance abuse camapign, showing that PCBs are better for you than alcohol," Schecter said.

Union officials predicted an angry backlash from members.

"As far as I'm concerned, he's free and welcome to come here and taste the water," said Charles J. Eynon, president of Local 002, Civil Service Employees Union. "In fact, I'll personally give it to him."

Patricia A. Cavanagh, field representative for the N.Y.S. Professional Employees Federation, was astonished by the Carey comments.

"We have been so low key," she said. "We don't want hysteria. I can't see any justification for those comments."

Assemblyman James R. Tallon Jr., D-Binghamton, chairman of the Health Committee, was present when Carey made the comment.

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"I was shocked, and I don't use that word very often," Tallon said from his Albany office. "To have the governor so flippantly made this statement is absolutely irresponsible."

Tallon said the governor undercut the work of the state health department, which has been working with local officials on the cleanup.

Carey said he was not worried that drinking the toxic substance would cause harm, although tests on laboratory animals have shown PCBs cause cancer and liver damage.

"You've got to take PCBs in quantities, steadily, over long periods of time, and probably be pregnant, which I don't intend to become," he joked. "It gets into your fatty tissue and then you get a PCB contamination.

Dr. David Axelrod, state health commissioner, later told reporters an eight-ounce glass of water containing PCBs would probably cause diarrhea.

"There's no such thing as a risk-free existence, as long as we have a free press," the governor concluded.



Items from tower recalled

Broome County has recalled papers and other materials removed from the contaminated Binghamton State Office Building to prevent toxins from spreading into the city.

Papers were removed from the tower after David K. Seiffert, in charge of the cleanup until Tuesday, gave in to agency officials' demands for files they ...

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