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PCB's present in sludge from treatment plant

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A routine test at the Northfield sewage treatment plant in January revealed the presence of a suspected cancer-causing chemical in the treated sewage sludge.

The chemical, one of several poly-chlorinated bi-phenyls (PCB's), was discovered in a test done for the state Pollution Control Agency. There had been no PCB's in earlier tests.

Although state and local officials are concerned about the presence of this chemical in the sewage sludge, they say there is no evidence of danger to human life.

"There's no real health hazard right now," Marvin Hora,a senior biologist for the PCA, said. "Nobody is going to die and nobody is going to get cancer by working in the sewage treatment plant."

PCB's have been shown to cause cancer in laboratory tests on animals, according to Hora and Jerry Mohrig, Carleton College chemistry professor.

PCB's have been used for years in heat exchange units for electrical equipment, such as large transformers, and as fire retardants. They have also been widely used in industrial applications, such as paint bases and plastics, Hora said.

The Monsanto company, which was the sole manufacturer of PCB's, has either stopped production of the chemicals or is about to, Mohrig said.

The presence of the PCB's was first made public at the Tuesday, March 6, meeting of the Cannon River Advisory council at Cannon Falls.

The PCB's first showed up in a test made on January 11. A test done two years ago, according to Hora, revealed no PCB's at all.

The January test showed a PCB concentration of 27 parts per million (ppm), Hora said. A follow-up test done on February 1, to confirm the results of the first test, showed about 11 ppm. Both levels are considered very significant by the PCA.

Some of the sludge from the Northfield sewage treatment plant is hauled off by a farmer for use as fertilizer, according to Northfield city administrator Peter Stolley.

Scientists and biologists compare the accumulation of PCB's in the food chain to that of DDT, which is now banned in this country. Both chemicals are extremely stable, according to Mohrig, and exist for hundreds of years without being broken down into other compounds by biological action.

PCB pollution of Lake Peppin has led the PCA to issue a warning to fishermen not to eat more than one fish meal from that lake per week.

"It was a real surprise to us to find these levels of 11 and 27 in Northfield," Hora said. He said he believes the source of the contamination may be a cracked transformer somewhere which somehow leaked its PCB insulation into the sewer system.

Whether the cause of the pollution was an isolated incident, such as a cracked transformer, or comes from a continuing source, is extremely important to sewage plant foreman Larry Turner. "We're going to go out into the system and try to find out where it is coming from," he said.

City officials were to meet with PCA officials on Wednesday, March 15, to discuss the PCB situation, and for a more general discussion of Northfield's plans for sewage plant expansion, according to Mayor Kent Eklund.

The PCA was expected to send a team to Northfield to conduct tests on the sludge (previous tests were done by an independent laboratory), and to make tests in the plant's primary and secondary digestors, and the sewage input and output, according to Turner.