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Leaky tank, court order complicate poison oil problem

FORT DODGE (UPI) — Several thousand gallons of crankcase oil, thought to be contaminated by a highly toxic chemical, have been loaded from two holding tanks into trucks, Al Schmitt, Cedar Falls, said today.

He said officials speeded up the transfer because one of the oil's holding tanks in Fort Dodge was leaking.

The oil is believed to be contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyl, a thick, colorless and odorless liquid that can cause cancer and birth defects if ingested. It is virtually indestructible and is manufactured in this country exclusively by Monsanto Industrial Chemical Co.

Schmitt, the owner of a road-oiling firm in Cedar Falls, had ordered 10,000 gallons of the PCB-contaminated substance, which he thought was waste crankcase oil and had planned to use it to spray dusty, gravel roads in the Cedar Falls and Fort Dodge areas.

Efforts to transport the oil from Fort Dodge back to holding tanks in Cedar Falls were thwarted Tuesday night by Black Hawk County sheriff's deputies, who prevented the trucks from crossing the county line.

The Black Hawk County attorney's office late Tuesday requested a temporary injunction against plans to move the oil through the county. The injunction was signed by Judge Dennis Bamsgaard.

The oil transfer in Fort Dodge was started after officials reported one of the tanks had been leaking at the rate of one pint per hour since Sunday.

The oil was found to be leaking out of the end of a pipe which protruded from the tank and at the seam from which the pipe extended, officials said, adding that residents in the area were not in danger because the oil had soaked into the ground and their water supply was taken from a deep well.

A three-foot high dike was placed around the two tanks and the partially soaked ground near the leakage was dug up and placed in plastic to protect stray animals, officials said.

One concern of DEQ officials is a possible runoff from the leak to a nearby creek, which empties into the Des Moines River. Officials earlier noted that a major disaster would occur if the PCB somehow got into food and water supplies.

Peter Hamlin, director of the DEQ's Land Quality Management Division, said samples from the ground, creek and the Des Moines River would be tested sometime Thursday or Friday. He said although residents in the Fort Dodge area were not in danger, Ottumwa would be affected because "that is the nearest place where surface water is withdrawn."

"There's not a whole lot you can do once it (the contaminated substance) gets into the water. I'm hoping it is a recent leak and just saturated the ground, but you never know until samples are taken," Hamlin said.

Rita Burbridge, director of the Webster County Health Department, urged residents who live near the oil tank not to drink tap water. Burbridge said persons living north of the city limits use water from shallow, sandpoint wells and the substance may have contaminated the water supply.

Fort Dodge Mayor Herb Conlon said the National Guard and the DEQ plan to transport the substance to holding tanks in Cedar Falls so the DEQ can conduct its tests on the substance at one location. Conlon said the action was not being taken to "alarm anyone," but to assure that no one gets near the oil.

The DEQ was conducting tests to determine the concentration of the chemical before a decision is made on where the shipment will be taken for disposal. DEQ officials said it probably will be next week before the tests are completed, and that the substance probably would be taken to a federally approved chemical disposal landfill at Sheffield, Ill., at a cost between $50,000 and $100,000.

About 10,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated subtance thought to be waste crankcase oil were shipped from St. Paul, Minn., late last week to Schmitty's Road Oiling Co., Cedar Falls, which had planned to spray dusty, gravel roads in the Cedar Falls and Fort Dodge areas with it. Some of it was placed in a tank at Cedar Falls and the remainder in tanks at Fort Dodge and near Marion in Linn County.

When the DEQ learned the liquid was contaminated, it ordered it not be used.