

SEP 14 1983

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

PG&E Doesn't Report PCB Spill To City for Hours

Homes in the middle of the 1500 block of Linda Mar Boulevard were exposed to poly chlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination just before noon Tuesday, Sept. 6, when a PG&E transformer apparently overheated, caught fire and exploded.

Pacifica firefighters were summoned to deal with the fire but neither fire nor police officials were notified by the utility of the PCB contamination until after 10 p.m. that evening when Police Watch Commander Sgt. Ted Merritt questioned the PG&E crews at the site.

PG&E District Manager James Eaneman said PG&E correctly notified state and county Environmental Protection Agencies and the U.S. Coast Guard, but had no procedure for notifying local emergency service forces.

Eaneman said it would seem logical to notify local authorities and in a meeting Monday with City Manager Dave Finigan and Police Chief Al Olson, PG&E guaranteed the city would be informed at once if

See Back Page

PCB Spill-

Continued from Page One

such an event should occur again in Pacifica.

Although Pacifica has no PCB-loaded capacitors (the briefcase-size boxes on utility poles) some transformers (barrel-like pole boxes) were loaded with mineral oil coolant piped through equipment that had been used to load the PCB capacitors. That system is no longer used by PG&E.

Eaneman said there are several hundred pole transformers in Pacifica and there is no way to know which might have traces of PCBs.

He said the level of contamination was 300 parts of PCBs to 1 million, rated "contaminated" by the Environmental Protection Agency, but after PG&E crews cleaned up the area, tests showed the level was down to less than 50 parts per million, rated "no contamination."

PCBs have been classified as a carcinogenic—a cancer producing substance—with exposure producing symptoms from minor rash and irritation to death, based on the amount of exposure and the concentration of the toxic chemical.

Eaneman said the concentration of the spill in Pacifica was minor, since only traces of PCBs were in the 10 to 12 quarts of oil coolant spilled from the 12 to 15 gallon transformer. He said Pacifica could not be subjected to the type or level of contamination experienced in San Francisco when an underground vault exploded and a skyscraper had to be evacuated and later washed down and decontaminated.

"We just don't have that kind of equipment in Pacifica," Eaneman said.

According to Jean Foster, a resident at 1560 Linda Mar Blvd., across the street from the utility pole that blew up, she noted the transformer was popping and arcing electrical charges at 11:20 a.m. Tuesday. She said she called PG&E at once, but they did not respond for 75 minutes—a schedule of response PG&E and Eaneman dispute. Utility crews arrived just before or after the transformer exploded. She said a huge cloud of white-gray smoke bloomed over the Lou and June Brooks and William Sugrue homes at 1551 and 1559 Linda Mar Blvd.

She said she then called the city's emergency number, 911, and within two minutes, a unit of firefighters from the Linda Mar fire station was on the scene. The firefighters left when the fire was out, but PG&E crews stayed on the scene, blocked off the area in front of the homes and set about a cleanup and getting samples of the mineral oil spill for laboratory testing.

Foster, Brooks and Terry Smith, at 1539 Linda Mar Blvd., all say they were not informed, even when the first test results came back at about 6 p.m., that PCBs were involved in the coolant spill.

Stephen Foster's car was sitting at the curb almost directly under the exploded transformer and was subject to decontamination scrubbing by PG&E crews, as was the sidewalk and street in front of the three homes on the north side of the street.

The Fosters were not satisfied the decontamination was effective and negotiated with a PG&E claims representative to buy the car for \$1,000, which the utility did.

PG&E crews also used a backhoe to lift a 12-by-30 foot section of the lawn in front of the Brooks and Smith homes, with samples sent for lab analysis. Tests showed the contamination had been reduced to a safe level, but PG&E has agreed to replace the entire lawn in front of both homes.

Smith said she and her two youngsters, Dawnell, 5, and Michael, 2, are all suffering from stomach cramps, nausea, headache and she has a rash inside her mouth. She said Poison Control Center and Occupational Health officials say there is no way to determine if the symptoms are the result of PCB exposure until tests are complete.

"I am not out to get PG&E or any individual, I am not a hysterical female," Foster said, "I am an outraged citizen who believes the whole thing was handled poorly and I want something done to assure this is not going to happen again."

Eaneman said PG&E understands the concern of the residents but tried to assure them the risk from serious contamination was slight, since no one got into the oil spill at the base of the pole and there was no continuing fire-causing, PCB-charged smoke to contaminate the area.

"If we err, it is on the side of caution, but we realize how frightening such a situation can be," Eaneman said.