Town promises fight over PCB test plan

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Staff Writer

The Warrenton Town Board told its attorney Tuesday to go to court if necessary to block the state Department of Transportation's test plan to salvage PCB-contaminated soil from a roadside and store it at a maintenance center near the town's water supply.

"The board voted today to take what legal steps we could take to stop them from storing this PCB in the state highway maintenance area on the edge of Warrenton, and to keep them from hauling the PCB through Warrenton and storing it in an area where it could get into our water supply, Fishing Creek," Mayor W.A. Miles said.

State highway officials said the test Thursday would help them learn whether they could safely remove toxic PCBs from more than 210 miles of contaminated North Carolina roadsides without spreading them in dangerous amounts in the land nearby.

"This will be the first pickup of live or hot material," Dave Kelly, assistant state secretary of public safety, said earlier Tuesday. "We've had some dry runs with simulated materials." He could not be reached later for comment on the town board's action.

The test will be conducted on a contaminated mile-long stretch of N.C. 58 near Inez, a few miles southeast of Warrenton. Highway officials plan to store the contaminated soil in a highway maintenance complex just west of Warrenton near Fishing Creek, from which 3,200 Warrenton-area residents draw their water, Miles said.

State officials said the soil would be stored there only until a permanent storage site could be found.

"They say it's temporary," Miles said, "but you don't know how long 'temporary' is. You don't know if it's gonna be five days or five years."

Those participating in the test or observing it from a distance of less than 100 yards will be required to submit to blood tests before the test, to wear protective clothing during the test and to take showers and more blood tests afterward. The announcement of those precautions only served to alarm many Warrenton citizens, Miles said.

"We don't feel like the transportation department has treated us right, coming in and selecting this spot to dump it without consulting the town board or the county board of commissioners," Miles said.

The board would meet this morning with Kelly before initiating any legal action, Miles said.

Gerald T. Clifton, a Warrenton store manager, said Tuesday he was concerned about the possibility that the town's drinking water could become contaminated.

"There's just too many unknowns about it," he said. "Why take a chance?"

The tests will be designed to discover several things, including whether the pickup process will generate too much toxic dust and whether PCB-laden dirt scraped onto the asphalt road can be picked up completely.

"This is a chance to confirm what we have tried with simulated material and is believed to be a reasonable way to load it onto trucks," Kelly said.

PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, were dumped along 210 miles of North Carolina roads. Three men from upstate New York have been charged in connection with the dumping.

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