Exact amount of PCBs in county impossible to gauge

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What is the impact of PCB locally?

Following is a breakdown of the major utilities and industries in San Bernardino County that use or have found the presence of polychlorinated biphenyls in their machinery and equipment.

The list, however, is incomplete. The exact amount of PCBs present in this county is impossible to gauge because the chemical has been so widely used.

Despite the 1979 manufacturing ban on polychlorinated biphenyls, the toxic substance is still found to some degree in nearly every home, business and office building.

In fact, PCBs are virtually inescapable since they are present wherever electricity is generated, stored and/or used. This can encompass everything from huge electrical transformers and capacitors to television sets, microwave ovens and fluorescent lights.

Southern California Edison Co.

The county's chief utility uses PCBs in 153 of the electrical capacitors atop telephone poles in the city of San Bernardino. It does not use PCBs in its transformers, said Edison's information officer Joe Falkner. Figures for other cities were unavailable. Edison officials said the number of PCB-capacitors in San Bernardino "is comparable to other cities of its size."

Capacitors ordinarily look like large grey or white suitcases and transformers resemble big grey cans. And their functions are quite different. Capacitors store energy until needed. Transformers take "the raw electricity off the (utility) line and 'transform' it down to a voltage that is usable in your home, usually 110 (volts)," Falkner said.

Both types of equipment generate heat and PCB cooling oils have been used to guard against fires and explosions.

Edison also uses PCBs in a large number of capacitors in 17 power substations in the county's central district, which includes San Bernardino, Grand Terrace, Fontana, Rialto and Bloomington.

Each capacitor averages about three gallons of pure PCB liquid, which contains an average of about 500,000 parts-per-million (ppm) of the banned chemical.

No spills have occurred this year and only one spill was reported last year. That incident took place in Fontana in October and was handled "quickly and efficiently. No one was exposed to the PCB and no health problems were reported," Falkner said.

The spill occurred behind the Stater Bros. Market on San Bernardino Avenue and Sierra Way and was found when "an employee patroling the lines spotted the leak. We went out and cleaned it up, dug out the soil and replaced the capacitor with one containing a non-PCB solution," Falkner said.

Currently, all Edison electrical equipment containing PCB oils is marked with yellow warning tags. New equipment carries blue stickers showing it contains non-PCB fluids.

"We follow very specific guidelines and procedures for handling spills in accordance with the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency)," Falkner said. "The workers wear special protective clothing and full gas masks, gloves and plastic overshoes. The liquid from the spill is removed and placed in steel barrels along with any of the soil that is contaminated and any rags used to wipe it up."

It wasn't always that way, Falkner added.

"Quite honestly, we cleaned up PCB spills rather haphazardly before 1979. No one thought the spills were any more dangerous than an oil spill and that's how we treated them. We cleaned them up and threw all the soiled rags in the trash.

"PCBs have been used a long time — since the 1930s. It's not like it's something that all of a sudden magically appeared."

Falkner added that to his knowledge no Southern California Edison worker has ever had adverse health problems from exposure to PCB.

Southern California Gas Co.

Although Southern California's largest natural gas utility does not directly use PCB, "trace amounts" were recently found in five locations along its 37,000 miles of pipeline.

The PCB was discovered in routine tests made Feb. 25 and two of the five locations are in the North Needles area where the highest concentrations of PCBs were found, said San Bernardino district manager Ray Sharp.

The PCB concentrations were more than 500 ppm, preliminary tests showed, Sharp said. PCB also was found at the company's Hollywood base station, its Beverly Hill's base station and on one of its utility trucks that collects pipeline "drips," as the sediment containing the PCB is called.

"After checking at 27 locations, we found that five areas contained trace amounts of PCBs," Sharp said. "We found the chemical in the drips, which are like traps used in sinks."

Since PCBs are heavier than water, the compound filtered out of the gas as it moved along the pipeline and collected in the drips. "There's no danger of PCB entering anyone's house through their stove or anything like that. The PCB couldn't possibly get that far," Sharp said.

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When he got home — minus his shoes and socks — "Bob seemed a bit shook up. He started taking off all his clothes, every single stitch, and put them into a plastic trash bag," recalled Amy.

According to Bob, "They told me to put all the clothes I was wearing into a plastic trash bag — they said to make sure it was a heavy-duty type plastic bag — and to tie up the bag good and take it to a garbage dump."

Bob's boss told him he would be reimbursed for the clothing and boots. Within a week, Bob received a new pair of boots and a check to cover the clothing he'd thrown away.

Bob did not go to his doctor for a skin and blood test, like Amy wanted, "because I guess he didn't even want to think about the possibility that he might have been exposed to the PCB," his wife surmised.

After that first day, which Amy said "has become a big blur to me," she spent a week "trying to find out just what this chemical was. Someone at the (state) water resources board told me they thought it caused liver cancer but they weren't sure.

"I called all kinds of different state and county and federal agencies and got a real run-around. It took me all week to get no where. I just wanted to see if this stuff was dangerous or not."

Amy said one official told her PCB could be breathed through the skin's pores and absorbed through the eye tissue while another told her it was basically harmless and that she was overreacting.

The more phone calls she made, the more "these officials would say I was overreacting. I found hardly anyone sympathetic. And the ones who were concerned gave me a phone number to call someone else. They really didn't want to have anything to do with it. No one wanted to get involved.

"I don't know much about cancer and I'm not a chemist," Amy said. "But I know that if you are exposed to a known carcinogen, then 9 times out of 10 you'll get it; you'll develop cancer."

Bob says he feels fine "right now. I feel great today. But what about 10 years from now? Will I be fine then? Or will I be dying of cancer?"

The problem with PCB is that, although it is a known toxin, its full impact on human health is not known. Some scientists think PCB may be linked to cancer but others point to new evidence that suggests the compound may have no long-term effects.

But to anyone who's been exposed to PCB, that academic debate doesn't mean very much.

"It's the *not* knowing that is killing us," Amy said. "It's like this constant worry in the back of your mind. You try to forget and think it's nothing because you don't feel bad. But cancer doesn't make you feel bad at first, does it?"

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