

The Mobile
Press Register
MOBILE, ALA.
SAT. 01403

MAR 20 1977 *APL*

PCB disaster narrowly averted

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A solvent containing enough of a highly toxic substance to kill or cripple almost everyone in Iowa was about to be spread on the state's gravel roads, an official said Saturday.

Pete Hamlin, a state Department of Environmental Quality official, said disaster may have been averted by detection of the substance.

The solvent contained polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a thick, colorless and odorless liquid that is almost indestructible, he said. PCB can cause cancer and birth defects if ingested and has been held responsible for deaths throughout the world, Hamlin said.

The substance was mistaken by a trucker for crankcase oil and would have been spread on dusty gravel roads, he said.

Hamlin said the Environmental Protection Agency in Kansas City informed him Thursday of the 10,000-gallon shipment containing the PCB and he located the truck Friday.

The truck's driver had mistakenly loaded his tanker with a solvent containing six parts per thousand PCB, Hamlin said, adding that the safe level in drinking water is one part per trillion.

The shipment was bound for an Iowa firm that sprays gravel roads to keep down dust, Hamlin said, and if the roads had been sprayed and the PCB had contaminated food or water supplies, it could have been "catastrophic."

The driver said he was unaware the liquid contained PCB when he purchased it in St. Paul, Minn., Hamlin said.

Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co. of St. Louis is the only U.S. manufacturer of the chemical, Hamlin said. It has announced plans to discontinue production by late this year.

Monsanto owns the only incinerator that can destroy the chemical, but it refuses to burn imported PCB, Hamlin said. The state agency will test the shipment to determine where it originated, but "it would be too good to be true if it were from Monsanto," Hamlin said.

The costly alternative would be to ship it to a chemical landfill, he said.

In 1968, about 1,000 Japanese accidentally ate rice contaminated with PCB. They suffered several ill effects, including ulcers, jaundice, swelling, loss of hair, birth defects and death.