First poison waste buried at state site

BY KATE HARRIS
News staff writer

Waste Management of Alabama, Inc , the state's only hazardous wastes site, situated 20 miles north of Livingston, has buried its first shipment of PCB-contaminated materials.

PCBs is the popular name for polychlorinated biphenyls, used in a number of products from ink solvents to hydraulic fluids to insulation for electrical transformers and capacitors.

The product is so dangerous that the federal Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 has forbidden any more of it to be produced after January 1979 and any more sold after July 1979.

ALABAMIANS became concerned about PCBs in 1976 when fish in the Coosa River were found to be contaminated with it from a General Electric Co. plant in Rome, Ga. Georgia closed to fishing an area of the Coosa near the plant.

In the late 1960s an industrial accident caused 1,000 Japanese to become ill after eating rice oil contaminated with PCBs.

PCB is a chlorinated organic compound similar to DDT, and research by a specialist at the National Cancer Research Institute in Tokyo has linked it with liver cancer. PCBs cannot be chemically broken down in the environment but must be safely stored if they do not become an environmental hazard.

A LETTER from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notifying the Waste Management company on June 28 it was being issued a federal permit to dispose of PCB-contaminated material said the site has, in the past, accepted this material with approval from the state.

State Rep. Frank Campbell of Livingston, who has been active in opposing location of a hazardous wastes burial site in Sumter County, said, "That was news to the local people. They did not know that PCBs were being brought in here until EPA advertised in a local paper that the company had applied for a federal permit to bury the material."

EPA gave the public 30 days to comment

"It's a funny thing," said Campbell. "The federal government usually calls a public hearing on every little thing but this time they just asked for written comments.

"The rank and file of the people in this area don't like the idea of a hazardous wastes disposal area being in the county and especially they don't like it handling PCBs because they are afraid it will contaminate their water supply They don't like the odor of the site either."

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JOHN A. LITTLE, EPA deputy regional administrator, Atlanta, said no opposition to the federal permit was received from anyone during the 30-day comment period.

"We, along with state geologists, made a thorough investigation into how the environment would be affected and concluded that it is one of the safest sites possible for disposing of PCBs," he said.

People in the area had considered taking legal action, said Campbell, but "these people are not wealthy, so they abandoned the idea because they couldn't afford the cost.

"They're tolerating the site only because they feel they have no choice. They don't think Sumter County should become a dumping ground for the state, the region and the nation."

JAMES PARSONS, son-in-law of Gov. George Wallace, who, along with Mark Gregory of Memphis, is managing the Sumter County operation, said he expects several shipments of PCB-contaminated material to be brought to the site weekly.

The one buried Thursday was from a chemical company in Louisville, Ky.

"The material will be transported by enclosed tractor-trailer vans and come both from Alabama and out-of-state," Parsons said.

Since EPA has banned the manufacture of PCBs, equipment that is pulled out of service must be disposed of in EPA-approved sites, said Parsons.

There are two others in the nation, in Oregon and Idaho.

"Transformers are drained of the liquid containing PCBs and the liquid is incinerated elsewhere," said Parsons. "We are not permitted to incinerate it."

THE SITE also disposes of what is known as "hazardous" materials, such as pesticides, sludges, contaminated metals and chemical plant wastes.

Parsons said, however, that he looks at the Sumter County site "as a solution to one of mankind's problems rather than as a problem."

"It's better to have these materials in a secure, well-monitored facility than to have them polluting the streams as they were when they were disposed of indiscriminately," he said.

Dan Cooper of the state Department of Public Health said there were no regulations governing disposal of PCBs until February, when EPA issued them.

"There was no doubt in our minds that Waste Management would meet EPA standards. We felt the site was secure enough from the geological standpoint to dispose of PCBs."

He said the company has installed a separate trench to bury PCBs exclusively, that it is highly monitored and all known precautions are taken to see that there is no seepage.

Cooper added that the company accepted PCB-contaminated material with state approval from the time it began operating last summer until March, when it became necessary to get a federal permit.

"Then Waste Management stopped taking this material until it received the proper permit," said Cooper.

THE COMPANY'S corporate structure has changed since it began operations about a year ago. The original company, Resource Industries of Alabama Inc., merged in February with Waste Mangement Inc., which operates in 24 states, Canada and Saudi Arabia.

Parsons was president of the original company, which was formed with four other persons from Memphis.

Waste Management is headquartered in Oak Brook, Ill. Its president is H. Wayne Huizenga, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He also is chief operating officer and a company director.

Chairman of the board and chief executive officer is Dean L. Buntrock, of Oak Brook, Ill.

CHARLES WARREN, director of the Council of Environmental Quality, Washington, D.C., called PCBs a "very environmentally hazardous substance that must be dealt with most carefully."

The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, he said, authorizes EPA to regulate the use and disposal of PCB-contaminated material.

"EPA has been given the last word on how this should be done and has received strict guidelines to follow on disposing of the material in the interest of public safety," he said.

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