

AP Photo

Warning Sign
... near Pittsboro

Nash Area Shrugs Off PCB Danger

This story was reported by Observer staff writers Ken Allen, Howard Covington and Susan Jetton, and written by Allen.

State officials say the brown residue on the roadside along N.C. 58 in Nash County is a chemical called PCB, and they think it's poisonous. But people who live and work along the two-lane blacktop aren't worried about their health.

Dale Bone, who runs Dale Bone Farms, said Tuesday he didn't think the dumping would affect him or his tobacco, sweet potatoes or cucumbers, or, "I would have heard about it."

Ralph Langley, who runs a small grocery just north of Bone farms, said he first became aware of the PCB when a county health official called to ask him to warn migrant farm workers who shop at his store not to walk in the chemical.

Except for pedestrians detouring across the road to avoid walking in the five-inch-wide strip of deadened grass, life is going on as usual along N.C. 58 in Nash County, about 40 miles northeast of Raleigh.

But for state officials, life is more hectic as they try to discover:

● Who dumped the chemical along about 250 miles of rural

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roads in Piedmont and Eastern North Carolina.

● How best to clean up the chemical.

● How dangerous it really is to have the chemical along the roadside.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is a synthetic substance widely used as an insulator in transformers and capacitors until the the early 1970s.

The chemical fell into disfavor following a 1968 incident in Yushdj, Japan, when more than 1,000 people were stricken with skin, eye, stomach and liver disorders after they ate rice oil accidently contaminated with PCB, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Studies done after that incident showed the chemical can make humans ill and may cause cancer and deformed babies.

Once in the environment, parts of the chemical compound take decades to break down.

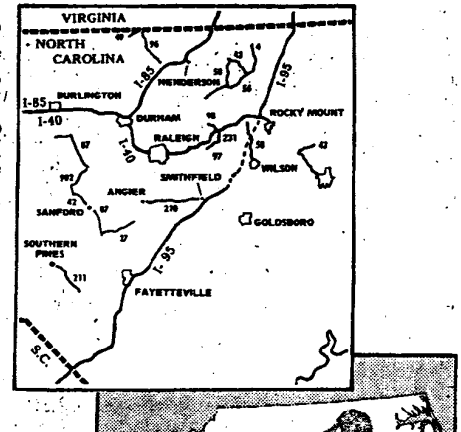
Fish in PCB-contaminated water absorb the chemical, which is passed up the food chain to humans whose bodies retain the chemical.

"I don't think anybody knows the threshhold level," said Ralph Jennings, chief of the toxic substance section of the EPA's Atlanta office.

In 1976, Congress passed the Toxic Substances Act, giving industry two years to stop production of PCBs. In 1977, the EPA banned discharging the chemcal into waterways.

Until last year, Monsanto Corp. of St. Louis was the main producer of PCB. The company stopped production after the ban.

Last April, the EPA stopped all burning of liquid PCB until standards could be drawn up. That meant companies which had been disposing of the chemical by burning it could no longer do that. North Carolina officials theorize that has caused the recent dumping along highways, since there is now no legal way to dispose of the chemical.



Gov. Jim Hunt, on vacation last week, spent more than an hour Tuesday afternoon being briefed about the PCB situation and alternative state actions. He wouldn't comment on the briefing, but is expected to announce the state's plan of action during his weekly news conference Thursday.

Steve Meehan, information officer for the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, said cleanup cost estimates are being prepared for two alternatives:

One would be to dig up the PCB-exposed soil and move it to a safe location. The other would be to spread on the exposed areas a charcoal and soap substance which would stop the PCB from seeping deeper into the soil or moving farther from the roadsides.

"It's looking more and more like we're going to have to dig it up," Meehan said. "The depth is the question. Samples are being taken now and we'll make a recommendation to the governor on how deep we have to go."

Dan Gilbert, heading the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) probe to find the dumpers, said Tuesday there were "no new developments but we are actively continuing our investigation." Gilbert said the SBI is receiving "a considerable number" of telephone calls from persons who think they can help.

State officials have claimed the chemical along the roads would not be dissolved by rains or seep into ground water. But Jennings said the risk may be higher than officials realize.

"The biggest danger is that it will be washed down to the streams," he said.

Martin Hines, state epidemiologist, said he will begin testing about 10 people late this week who have been exposed to the roadside dumpings.

"We don't expect to find higher levels (of PCB)," Hines said. "But if we do, there's nothing that can be done about reducing the levels."

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