

AUG 19 1978

'Dastardly Act'

Carolina Sees Red Over PCBs

From Herald Staff and Wire Reports

McGEE'S CROSSROADS, N.C. — Keith Langdon planned to celebrate his birthday last Saturday, having some friends over to his brother's farm near this map dot in eastern North Carolina.

But Langdon changed his mind. What made him change his mind has much of the Tar Heel state in an "almost unbelievable anger," as one resident puts it.

Several days earlier, workers on the Langdon farm began to feel ill. "I thought it was my high blood pressure," said M.H. Coates. "I was weak, sick at my stomach."

"I thought it was something they were spraying on the tobacco or the potatoes," said Anne P. Stephenson.

BUT IT WASN'T Coates' blood pressure, and it wasn't something they were spraying on the crops. It was fumes from the industrial chemical PCB, which had been dumped — illegally — along State Road 210 near the Langdon farm.

The deliberate spills, about a foot or a foot-and-a-half wide, extend far beyond the stretch of State Road 210 between Smithfield and Angier. They have matted the grass and dirt in the swales along 250 miles of rural roads, roughly in a 50-mile radius around the capital city of Raleigh.

"The wind could be a-blowin' it to you and your eyes would sting, your nose would burn and you'd be sick to your stomach," said Branton Miles, another worker on the farm of Mitchell Langdon. "You'd want water, but if you drank water you felt like you wanted to throw it up."

"You sure didn't want anything to eat at dinner that day."

The dumping apparently occurred in the first week of August.

Gov. James Hunt denounced it as a "dastardly act" on Thursday and said the state will spend up to \$15 million to clean up the contaminated earth. He also said the state will pay for blood tests for people who think they might have been exposed.

"THERE IS no imminent health danger," Hunt's press secretary, Gary Pearce, said Friday. "But PCB contamination is a long-term thing. That's what makes it scary. We don't know the long-term effects of PCBs on humans."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are extremely stable hydrocarbons that contain chlorine. Because they are fire-resistant, they have been used as an insulating fluid in electrical equipment since the late 1920s.

It wasn't until 1966 that scientists discovered that PCBs don't break down, that they remain in the environment unless burned at about 2,200° Fahrenheit.

The other shoe fell a few years later. Scientists found that PCBs are a possible cancer-causing agent and also are suspected of causing birth defects. By eating PCB-contaminated foods, which can include fish, beef, poultry, dairy products or vegetables, humans may have a buildup of the chemical in their fatty tissue and, risk long-term health problems.

Just two months ago the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed that the importation and use of PCBs be prohibited.

MONSANTO CO., which had been the only U.S. manufacturer of PCBs, voluntarily stopped producing the chemicals a year ago. But EPA officials say about 400 million pounds have found their way into the environment through leaks, vaporization and dumping — both legal and illegal.

Stuart George, of the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources, theorized Friday that "some company, sitting on several thousand gallons of the stuff, maybe just didn't have the assets to dispose of it properly."

The state's Bureau of Investigation is looking into the dumping. Although the deed is only a misdemeanor in North Carolina, sulfur federal chemical-dumping laws carry a maximum \$25,000 fine and one-year jail term.

Gov. Hunt said health officials in the 15 affected counties will deliver notices on the danger of prolonged exposure to PCBs to residents of the contaminated areas. Warning signs also are to be posted.

AND, WITHIN the next two weeks, state Department of Transportation employees are to begin cleaning up the roadsides. First they'll cover the foot-wide spill areas with activated carbon to suck up as much of the chemicals as possible. Then they'll dig up the stained grass and soil — an estimated 52,500 tons — for burial on three or four isolated, state-owned tracts in the eastern part of the state.

Meanwhile, North Carolinians struggle with their anger over the dumping. Natural Resources Secretary Howard Lee called it "an outrageous act against the environment."

Stuart George, a Lee subordinate, said, "People are incensed that anyone would jump into a tank truck in the middle of the night and dump such a long-lasting, nasty chemical."

— STEVE SINK