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Edmisten says state has PCB spill suspects

From Staff and Wire Reports

WILMINGTON — State Attorney General Rufus L. Edmisten said Saturday the state has suspects in PCB spills that have occurred recently along 270 miles of North Carolina roads.

"For the first time, today we have specific suspects in the case — names, addresses and companies," Edmisten said. "I'll tell you no more, but we do have suspects, and I expect to push this investigation until some arrests will be made."

Edmisten, speaking at a political fund-raising event here, said he did not think anything could be done to prevent more spills. But he said that he believed penalties for dumping chemicals should be stiffer, and that his office is drawing up legislation to make chemical dumping a felony.

Moultie P. Hines, state epidemiologist with the Department of Human Resources, said Saturday that blood tests and studies of the liver function of some persons exposed to the PCB spills will not be available until late this week.

Hines's staff is making a study of selected persons exposed to the chemical spills to determine if their health has been affected.

Samples from six new areas where chemical spills were reported Friday will not be tested for PCBs until Monday, said Ray E. Kelling, supervisor of the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development laboratory. Kelling said the samples were received at the lab Friday afternoon.

The state Department of Agriculture is testing crops in the areas of the PCB spills to determine if there has been contamination.

Jim Devine, a state Department of Agriculture spokesman, said officials will be testing the crops through the weekend. He said if contamination is found in the crops, the state would probably advise farmers of the situation and ask them not harvest the crops.

"We haven't turned up anything to excite us yet, and we don't expect any problem of any magnitude," Devine said. He said if crop contamination is found, it would probably be confined to the row nearest the road.

Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. announced at a news conference Thursday that the state would soon begin removing PCB-contaminated soil from along the roads. He said the cost of digging up the soil and hauling it to disposal sites may cost as much as $2.5 million.

The state Department of Transportation will spray the contaminated areas with a solution of activated charcoal, soapy water and emulsified asphalt. The solution is designed to "deactivate" the PCBs before the soil is removed so the PCBs won't be absorbed into the soil or washed away.

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