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Jail prisoners file $6 million in PCB claims

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Santa Clara County accused of 'willfully' exposing them

By Sidney Hill
Staff Writer

Nineteen prisoners have filed claims for a total of $6 million in damages, alleging that Santa Clara County officials "willfully" exposed them to toxic PCBs in the main county jail.

In six claims, the inmates charged that the county was negligent because it didn't move to protect them from PCBs, even though county officials knew the chemicals were hazardous.

Guards last week discovered leaks in three transformers that contain the PCBs.

Claims identical

None of the inmates used attorneys to file the claims, all of which were worded the same and filed last Friday.

The inmates all are awaiting trial, and sheriff's department officials said two of them have filed a number of lawsuits while incarcerated. The sheriff's department refused to let any of the inmates be interviewed Monday.

There is general concern over PCBs because they have been known to cause cancer in certain animals and they move easily into the human bloodstream if touched or inhaled through smoke.

County maintenance workers said they knew the substance was escaping from the transformers as early as June 1981, but they didn't report it to their superiors.

Instead, they placed trays containing an industrial absorbent under two of the transformers and left them there until the jail guards discovered them.

Paul Sagers, who heads the county's General Services Agency, has insisted that the situation was handled properly because the leaks were too small to be dangerous.

But the board of supervisors, responding to public concern about PCBs, exhorted Sagers to give the jail priority in a $300,000 program the board approved last month to replace PCB-containing transformers in 13 county buildings.

The supervisors also expect to hear today how the leaky transformers have been handled, as well as how much it would cost to give health tests to people who work in the jail.

The union representing janitors, cooks and clerks requested the tests last week. And the head of the Deputy Sheriffs' Association threatened to pull the guards out of the jail if the leaks weren't plugged.

Dams built

Sagers said Monday that maintenance workers spent the weekend constructing special dams around PCB-containing transformers, and that those in the jail were done first. The dams are designed to catch any spills until the transformers can be replaced.

He soon will hire a consultant to advise him on how to replace all the county's PCB-containing transformers, Sagers said.

An Environmental Protection Agency spokesman said the county's handling of transformers will be investigated to determine whether a fine is warranted. Don Clark, the county's chief attorney, said the inmates' claims will be taken seriously but that they probably will be denied because the county's public health director has said the amount of PCBs leaking in the jail didn't pose a health hazard.

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