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PCB Spill Has N.C. Undecided

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RALEIGH — North Carolina officials still haven't decided whether they'll have to dig up road shoulders along 250 miles of highway to get rid of soil soaked with the cancer-causing chemical polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB).

State chemists couldn't tell from initial soil samples exactly how deeply the chemical is sinking.

Limited analysis indicates the chemical is not moving from the top soil layers exposed to PCB, but state experts say they need more soil samples before they can decide whether to put something on the chemical to control its spread or dig up the soil.

Meanwhile, the State Bureau of Investigation still is trying to find out who dumped the PCB along state roads in 15 North Carolina counties, including Johnston, Harnett, Franklin, Granville, Nash and Wake.

Gov. Jim Hunt has offered a \$2,500 reward to anyone who gives the SBI information that leads to the arrest and conviction of people responsible for the dumping.

State and federal officials meeting Monday in Raleigh said there is no doubt the dumping was deliberate. John Dickinson of the federal Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta said deliberate dumpings have been found in other Southeastern states.

PCB is used to insulate capacitors and high-voltage transformers.

Strict new laws governing the handling of such chemicals have increased the cost of getting rid of them, and state officials believe the dumping in North Carolina may have been an effort to circumvent the laws.

Dickinson met Monday with representatives of the attorney general's office and the state departments of natural resources, human resources, transportation, and crime control to talk about the situation.

The state must decide whether to dig up the PCB-soaked soil or to cover it with a charcoal-and-soap substance to stop the chemical from spreading.

The state estimates it would cost millions of dollars to dig up the soil exposed to the PCB. Officials are reluctant to put an exact cost on the job.

Originally, transportation officials talked about having to dig out soil a foot deep in the exposed areas along 250 miles of highway — about the same distance as a round trip from Raleigh to Charlotte. But they now believe they'll have to dig down only about three inches, probably using a bulldozer with a blade.

They're also looking for a place to dispose of the soil if they dig it up. Natural resources spokesman Steve Meschan said one possibility is federal property — perhaps a military artillery range.

A huge hole would have to be dug and lined with an absorbent rock to hold the soil.

No new dumpings of the chemical, shown to cause cancer in mice and illness in humans when ingested, have been found since last week.

The chemical when freshly dumped glistens on the soil or grass like oil. Later the grass turns brown.

Immediate exposure, such as children playing in exposed soil, then putting their hands in their mouths, probably wouldn't be harmful. But long-term exposure to the chemical could have adverse effects.

The major disaster traced to PCB was in Japan, where the chemical got into an oil used on rice and heavy consumption of the PCB-soaked rice over about three months caused deformities.

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