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Chemical Spill Said To Be Sufficiently Cleaned

Laboratory tests conducted at the site of the December spill of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) west of Green River indicated that the spill was cleaned up sufficiently and the PCB didn't reach ground water.

The tests were released Wednesday by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Denver.

Frozen ground and tight soil structure in the area were credited with keeping the toxic chemical from reaching ground water, according to Dr. George Rice of the EPA's emergency response branch.

The spill occurred Dec. 13 when a C and H Transport truck carrying an electrical transformer containing PCB crashed on Interstate 80 about 10 miles east of Little America.

"We were quite lucky in that it (PCB) didn't penetrate that much," Rice said. He indicated that the soil where the PCBs were spilled contained 10 parts per million of the chemical which is a "very good cleanup."

About 1,200 gallons of PCBs were spilled, which has been called the largest of its kind in the country. Rice said 117 55-gallon drums and two full dump trucks of chemical-absorbed soil were removed from the site and taken to underground Titan Missile silos at Mountain Home, Idaho.

"The acid traces are well within a reasonable level and much lower than residuals left after similiar spills in other areas across the country," said Bill Garland of Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality.

However, further tests will be conducted, according to Rice. C and H Transport will install monitoring equipment at various points near the spill site to keep track of chemical seepage.

This is necessary because the chemical doesn't degrade in the environment and if enough is left in one area it will seep down until it reaches ground water.

The PCB problem has become a nationwide dilemma in recent months. Various state governments and federal agencies as well the Ford Administration, have gotten into the act to rid the environment of PCBs.

PCB is a highly toxic chemical which can cause cancer, reproductive failure, skin disease, nervous disorders and still births among workers exposed to the chemical directly according to a petition filed by the Environmental Defense Fund and the National Resources Defense Council.

The EPA is currently conducting a major effort to remove PCB from the environment as rapidly as possible. But even if the effort begins now it will take a long time to remove the chemical from the environment according to Rice.

Rice said PCB is a very stable chemical and nothing had been developed which will neutralize it. PCB traces have been found in remote places such as Antarctica and the Arctic.

Sediments from most streams, reservoirs and lakes contain PCBs and the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has begun seizing fish sold in interstate commerce if they exceed the present PCB limit of five parts per million.

The FDA is considering lowering this amount in light of recent evidence indicating the danger the chemical holds for humans.

Most fish consumed by humans comes from salt water and poses no problem the FDA said but "considerably higher levels of PCBs are being detected" in freshwater sports fish such as coho and chinook salmon and lake trout.

Spills of PCB, which is manufactured exclusively by Monsanto in the U.S., are not the only way the chemical is getting into the environment however.

General Electric, for example, is dumping PCBs into the Hudson River, causing a major dispute in the New York area. If the plant is forced to move, the economies of two counties are endangered.

A Maryland river was closed due to the large scale dumping of PCBs by a major corporation.

PCBs are fire-resistant chemicals used as insulating fluids in electrical equipments. No effective substitute for the chemical has been developed according to EPA Administrator Russell Train.

An estimated 700 million pounds of the chemical have been produced in the U.S. since 1929 with about 300 million pounds currently in service.

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