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EPA may study the risk of PCBs in transformers

By ROBERT SANGEORGE
United Press International

WASHINGTON — The EPA is signaling that it may reverse the Reagan administration's policy of doing nothing about the health threat posed by toxic chemical emissions from electrical transformer fires involving PCBs.

PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — are still used as liquid coolant and insulating material in about 140,000 electrical transformers in the United States.

The decision to consider new restrictions is the result of an out-of-court agreement between the EPA and two national environmental groups that sued the agency over its 1980 refusal to assess the health risk of PCB transformer fires. The earlier policy was issued under Administrator Anne Burford, before she resigned under pressure.

ALVIN ALM, DEPUTY administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, announced Friday that federal officials are asking for information from states, cities, industry and health groups on the dangers posed by PCB transformer fires.

Tests on laboratory animals show PCBs can cause reproductive problems, skin lesions and tumors.

"Of even more concern to us are some of the chemical reaction products resulting from the incomplete combustion of PCBs by themselves" and when mixed with other transformer chemicals, Alm said.

Such fires can produce a dioxin-contaminated substance, he said, as well as a chemical, polychlorinated dibenzofurans, that causes anemia and other blood disorders.

ALM SAID THE agency's best information on the hazard comes from an evaluation of recent PCB-related fires in Binghamton, N.Y., San Francisco and Chicago.

New deal prompts action on federal guidelines.

PCBs belong to a family of organic compounds known as chlorinated hydrocarbons. They were produced in the United States between 1929 and 1977. The primary U.S. manufacturer stopped making the chemical in 1977.

Although PCBs are no longer produced in the United States for transformer use, the EPA estimates that about 140,000 transformers containing PCBs are still in service, about 20,000 of them owned by electric utilities.

In 1978, the agency decided to allow continued use of PCBs in "intact, non-leaking capacitors, electromagnets and transformers," except for railroad transformers.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS successfully challenged that decision in federal court. As a result, the agency in 1982 limited the use of electrical transformers in facilities involved in food or feed handling.

But it permitted continued use "for the remainder of their useful lives," of all other categories of non-railroad PCB transformers.

The Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council then legally contested the EPA's refusal to consider the risk of PCB transformer fires. This prompted the agency's latest move.