

Cleanup Is Begun At PCB-Polluted Waste Facility

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The job of scooping up and carting away 58,500 gallons of chemically contaminated soil from a makeshift waste disposal site in Jefferson County began today under the supervision of federal environmental agents.

The chemical is polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB. It can cause skin and liver ailments.

Yesterday, a 3000-foot segment of a tributary of the Meramec River was diverted through a pipeline so that it would bypass the contaminated area. Chemicals from the 2500-square foot contaminated area have been leaking into the creek, a nameless tributary of Calvey Creek, for about six weeks, officials say.

Harry U. Gilmer, a chemical engineer for the Kansas City office of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, is co-ordinating the cleanup operation. "We made considerable headway, but it's probably going to take us two weeks to clean up the whole area," he said.

The waste was dumped in the area last February by a driver for the Bliss Salvage Oil Co. of Ellisville, officials say. The state has asked Jefferson County Circuit Judge Charles Sheehan to order the company to identify a site from which wastes were removed from several weeks ago and to ban the company from transporting them.

In addition, the state is asking that the company be fined \$10,000 for each day the wastes were kept at the pit or allowed to seep into the stream. A hearing on the state's request was scheduled for today at the courthouse in Hillsboro.

Laboratory analysis of soil samples taken from the waste pit indicate PCB levels ranging from 1.4 per cent to 1.8 per cent — or from 14,000 to 18,000 parts of chemical for each 1,000,000 parts of soil. Gilmer described those levels as "dangerously high."

PCBs are used in electrical transformers and capacitors, in lubricants, in

waterproofing chemicals and in "carbonless" duplicating paper. The only domestic producer of the chemicals, the Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, plans to halt production by next November because of the risk they pose.

Federal officials are treating the disposal site as a major threat to the environment. The Coast Guard's Gulf Strike Team Force has sent several investigators to the scene from its headquarters in Bay St. Louis, Miss. The Gulf Strike Team Force is a 26-member group trained to fight oil spills.

In addition, the EPA's Emergency Environmental Research Unit arrived in Jefferson County from Edison, N.J., yesterday with a special environmental emergency response unit to filter the polluted water in the creek.

The cleanup operation is being financed by funds from the EPA's emergency fund, administered by the Coast Guard. Gilmer said the Federal Government would probably try to recover the costs of the cleanup from the polluter.

Gilmer said most of the residents of the area had been warned to stay away from the creek and the disposal site. But he said it was impossible to determine how many of them had been exposed to PCBs when a fire was set in the pit last March 11. The fire caused the PCBs to vaporize and spread over the area. "Wherever they fall, there is the potential that they will work their way into the food chain," he said.

The wastes were originally in a 250-square-foot pit on the property of Al Harris, near the town of Dittmer, about 85 miles southwest of St. Louis.

After state officials began investigating complaints from neighbors, some of the wastes were carted away by Bliss; others were plowed under. "The company's cleanup operation was actually a cover-up operation," Gilmer said. "Instead of a 250-square-foot area, we've got a 2500-square-foot area to clean up."

The cleanup crew has ordered 900 55-gallon drums, which will be used to hold the wastes while they are transported to a sanitary landfill site in Illinois.