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PCB polluting beds of rivers, chemist thinks

GREENSBORO (AP) — Most North Carolina riverbeds downstream from a waste-treatment plant probably contain the cancer-causing substance PCB, a research chemist says.

Hobart Souther, a member of the Southern Academy of Arts and Sciences and author of several scholarly papers on water treatment, said PCB — polychlorinated biphenyls — have been dumped indirectly into the state's waterways for years.

Souther said spent PCB, once used as an insulating material in electrical transformers, had been dumped routinely into municipal sewerage systems that eventually emptied into streams.

No tests made

State officials, faced with the task of removing PCB illegally dumped along roads two years ago, say that Souther's theory may have merit but that no tests have been conducted.

Ted Mew, head of the enforcement and emergency response section of the state Department of Human Resources, said a search for waterborne PCBs is not economically justifiable.

"You're looking at 18,000 to 19,000 miles of rivers in North Carolina," he said. "There's just no practical way to begin such a test."

"We know of no concentration of PCB on riverbeds. If we were to learn of a specific location, we would check it out immediately."

Official knows of theory

Russell Radford, an assistant supervisor with the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, said it was not the first time he had heard of Souther's theory.

"At this point, I would not try to refute what he's saying because we've not taken the bottom samples," Radford said. "It's likely as not that PCBs may have gone through the treatment plants, but it's likely as not that if it went through in significant amounts we'd detect it."

Both state officials noted that water quality samples are taken routinely. However, Souther pointed out that PCB probably would settle to the bottom of waterways and might not show up in water tests.

Souther said it would take about 3 ounces of PCB to kill a 160-pound person.

Miracle chemical

First manufactured in 1929, PCB once were heralded as a miracle chemical. Resembling a colorless syrup in its unadulterated state, the substance's resistance to heat made it useful as insulating material for transformers.

PCB also were used in the manufacture of such products as paint, fluorescent light fixtures and carbonless copy paper. The used transformer oil was used for years as a spray to settle dust on dirt roads.

Reports linking PCB to illness called wrong

United Press International

Published reports that the state Industrial Commission had described a Bladen County man's illness as "PCB contamination" were incorrect, the commission's chairman said Wednesday.

William H. Stephenson said in a letter to several news organizations that the commission has never filed a report on the man — Douglas T. Roberts of Kelly.

A worker's compensation form was made out for Roberts in connection with treatment he received at Bladen County Hospital Sept. 26, Stephenson said. But Stephenson said the form was for treatment rendered by Dr. Van E. Helms, an emergency room physician.

"Dr. Helms is in no way connected with the Industrial Commission and any statement made by him is not an official report filed by the Industrial Commission," Stephenson said.

Helms said on the form that Roberts was in a PCB-contaminated area. PCB was dumped along about 200 miles of North Carolina roads two years ago. The chemical has been linked to cancer.