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EPA to discuss pollution cleanup

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RALEIGH -- A public meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday to disclose plans to clean up the source of potentially hazardous pollution contaminating Lake Crabtree and Crabtree Creek, which runs through North Raleigh.

The contamination -- primarily polychlorinated biphenyls -- came from spills of toxic oil used in electrical transformers.

Ward Transformer Industrial, located off Mount Herman Road near Raleigh-Durham International Airport, built and reconditioned transformers from 1964 until 2005 at the 11-acre site.

PCBs, once widely used in power transformers as a flame retardant, has been linked to cancer in humans.

The chemical has not been used in new transformers since 1977, but Ward's methods of handling PCB-laced oil drained from the transformers led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks. The pollution has triggered a ban on eating fish caught in Lake Crabtree, part of a county park in Morrisville.

Ward's facility has been designated as a high-priority hazard under the federal government's Superfund Program. A settlement approved by the federal government calls for Ward and its customers, including Progress Energy, to pay for cleaning up the estimated 100,000 tons of contaminated soil at the site.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hold a question-and-answer session on plans to clean up the site from 5 to 8 p.m. at the North Raleigh Hilton. The hotel is located at 3415 Wake Forest Road. The federal agency has reviewed competing proposals on how to best remove the PCBs from Ward and is expected to announce its decision at the meeting.

The first choice of Ward and the other companies involved is a cleanup method called direct-fired thermal desorption. Contaminated soil is dug up and heated in a giant industrial dryer, similar to a clothes dryer, causing the pollutants to vaporize. The PCB vapors are then destroyed in an afterburner.

A task force of local citizens has expressed concern that the exhaust from the furnace could cause further pollution from dioxins formed as a result of combustion process. Some studies have suggested that exposure to high levels of dioxins can also cause cancer.

The N.C. Waste Awareness and Reduction Network and other groups have called for a more expensive plan that would require the contaminated soil to be dug up and removed to a toxic waste landfill.

Drew Cade, the manager of Lake Crabtree County Park, said Wednesday that he expects the EPA will approve a plan that combines the different methods.

"It's probably going to be more than one technology involved," Cade said.

"The supposition all along is that they would have to use different techniques depending on the volume and contamination levels, so I'm assuming that will still be the case. If that's changed, they'll let people know at this meeting."

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