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Subscription until: 12/14/2015 11:59 PM

Record 19 of 60

News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)

August 12, 2005

Officials demand PCB cleanup

Author: Wade Rawlins; Staff Writer

Edition: Final

Section: News

Page: B3

Index Terms:

ENVIRONMENT

HEALTH

SAFETY

COST

Charles Meeker

Ward Transformer

Estimated printed pages: 2

Article Text:

Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to begin within 30 days cleaning up a contaminated industrial site that has polluted fish in a nearby recreational lake.

Meanwhile, a citizens' task force studying the Ward Transformer contamination began drafting recommendations Thursday about further steps that local, state and federal officials should take, including more extensive testing and possible enforcement actions.

In a letter to the EPA, Meeker said that he, Wake Commissioners Chairman Joe Bryan and Cary Mayor Ernest McAlister viewed the situation as "an emergency with serious public health implications."

"A cleanup is required right away, not years from now," Meeker said in an interview. "In fact, a cleanup was required years ago."

Ward Transformer has reconditioned electrical transformers at an 11-acre industrial site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport since 1964. Some transformers contained polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, a class of chemicals that were added to oil as coolants until Congress banned them in 1979 because of health and environmental risks.

EPA representatives have said that removing PCB-contaminated soil from the Ward Transformer site was a priority, but have offered no timetable. They are negotiating with Ward and other companies, including Progress Energy, that took contaminated transformers to Ward to help pay for the cleanup.

Ward's methods of handling oil drained from transformers in the 1960s and

1970s led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks. Meeker said the issue came to the elected leaders' attention last month when The News & Observer reported that contamination from the site had spread to adjoining streams and contaminated fish in Lake Crabtree. "Unless we get Lake Crabtree cleaned up, it's going to be a problem forever," said Bryan, the commissioners' chairman. Meeker said the EPA should start removing contaminated soil, close ditches carrying contamination into adjoining creeks, do further testing of sediment in creeks and Lake Crabtree and improve the stormwater system at the industrial site to make sure no more PCBs leave the site. Laura Niles, a spokeswoman for the EPA, said: "Our Waste Division is deciding how to respond [to the letter] and what exactly we are going to do as part of that request." The citizens' task force agreed that the priority was cleaning up the industrial site, which has been contaminated since environmental officials first found high levels of PCBs more than 25 years ago. "It's amazing the site has been hemorrhaging PCBs as long as it has," said Sherry Johnson of Raleigh, a task force member. "What is necessary to clean up and stabilize the site needs to begin immediately." The task force also wants the EPA to agree to perform additional testing in Lake Crabtree before the end of the year to determine the extent of pollution in the lake. Dean Naujoks, a task force member and Upper Neuse riverkeeper, suggested local governments undertake further testing if the EPA won't agree. Tom McCormick, the Raleigh city attorney, said elected officials wanted to "find out what is in Lake Crabtree and Umstead State Park." The task force also wants state environmental officials to review their authority to take legal action under federal law to recover damages to natural resources and be prepared to exercise the authority. They also recommended that the city consider stopping Ward Transformer from discharging stormwater containing PCBs as an illicit discharge off site and take legal action under nuisance laws. They plan to present recommendations to Raleigh, Cary and Wake County leaders next month.

Caption:

Meeker

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Record Number: il315689

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