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3 ways to clean toxic site

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The companies responsible for cleaning up the contaminated Ward Transformer industrial property and environmental regulators are considering treating the soil and incinerating the toxic PCBs on site, instead of hauling off tons of dirt and barrels of liquid contaminants.

A portable unit with an afterburner is one of three alternatives a contractor has presented for decontaminating 100,000 tons of polluted soil at the Superfund site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is reviewing the proposals.

The contamination -- primarily highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls -- came from spills of oil used in electrical transformers in the 1960s and '70s. Ward Transformer has built and reconditioned the devices at the site since 1964. The company's methods of handling PCB-laced oil drained from the transformers led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks.

A settlement approved by the U.S. Department of Justice last fall calls for Ward and its customers, including Raleigh-based utility Progress Energy, to pay for cleanup of the 11-acre site. The EPA estimates the cost at \$5.2 million.

The volume of tainted soil at the Ward site is significantly larger than earlier suspected, so decontaminating on site could avoid transport costs.

The alternatives being considered are:

- Digging up and hauling off the contaminated soil.
- Using an on-site process called thermal desorption to heat the contaminated soil, vaporizing the PCBs, which are then chilled back into liquid and hauled away.
- Heating the contaminated soil in a similar method to turn the PCBs into vapors, then incinerating the PCB gases to destroy them, leaving nothing that needs to be transported off site.

Keith Poston, a spokesman for Progress Energy, said the direct-fired approach sounds reasonable.

"One of the things that is positive about it is you remove and destroy the contaminants," Poston said. "Because of the heat, there is a cooling stack. ... You have a steam plume, but no harmful contaminants."

Luis Flores, project manager for EPA, said on-site treatment is more attractive and cost-effective than digging up and hauling off soil. Bids

are being sought on the different methods.

"Any of the alternatives ... can be done safely and will be done in a way that poses no risk to anyone," Flores said.

Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker said city leaders need a better understanding of the processes.

"The council will want to review whether incineration of hazardous waste makes sense in this context and offer an opinion to EPA before a final decision is made," Meeker said.

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