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Contamination estimate grows

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Contamination at the Ward Transformer site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport is more widespread than earlier suspected, and the cleanup will include digging up soil and likely demolishing the building. Investigators say about 100,000 tons of soil are contaminated and must be treated. The amount of soil needing treatment is more than 50 percent above the earlier estimate of 62,400 tons.

"As they are digging, they will keep taking samples," said Nile Testerman, an environmental engineer with the state Division of Waste Management's Superfund section. "It's most likely that number will go up."

The cleanup will not touch the pollution that has moved downstream and contaminated fish in Lake Crabtree, Crabtree Creek, Brier Creek and Brier Creek Reservoir, prompting officials to post signs along the waterways warning people not to eat the fish. That pollution is still under study. The contamination -- primarily highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls -- came from spills of PCB-laced oil used in transformers in the 1960s and '70s. Ward Transformer has built and reconditioned electrical transformers at the site since 1964. Ward's methods of handling PCB-laced oil drained from transformers it serviced led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks.

In 2003, the site was placed on the list of the nation's most polluted sites overseen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program.

A settlement that was 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 removal of contaminated soil from the 11-acre site. EPA

estimates the cost of cleaning up the site itself at \$5.2 million, but that figure is likely to increase.

Ward Transformer has shut down its manufacturing operations, said Walter Brock, an attorney for Ward.

"That was not going to be feasible with the ongoing cleanup," Brock said. Brock said the company would no longer manufacture, repair or store oil-filled transformers at the property on Mount Herman Road to prevent any possibility of future recontamination. He told the EPA that the company wants to keep open the option of some type of manufacturing or storage of dry-type transformers.

"They don't know what, if any, activity will be carried out on the site in the future," Brock said.

The company continues as a broker for transformer sales.

Tests revealed contamination underneath the manufacturing building to a depth of 11 feet, with more contamination in a wooded area adjacent to the site. Samples of bricks from the building showed they also were contaminated.

Because the cleanup involves a large amount of soil, the companies paying for the cleanup are considering decontaminating the soil on-site and reburying it rather than hauling it off. They are taking bids on both disposal methods.

"Now that the amount of soil is so much larger, on-site treatment is a cost-effective, attractive alternative," said Luis Flores, EPA's project manager.

The on-site treatment method would be thermal desorption, which the EPA has selected to clean 59 Superfund sites.

The process takes tainted soil and cooks it in an oven to vaporize the PCBs. The vapors are captured and then chilled to turn them back to liquid. The liquid is collected and hauled away, leaving clean soil that is buried at the site. The method was used in 2003 to decontaminate 81,500 tons of contaminated soil at the Warren County landfill, which contained PCBs that a Ward Transformer contractor had illegally sprayed along roadsides.

The EPA has scheduled a public meeting at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Morrisville Commerce Building, 260 Town Hall Drive, to outline the cleanup plan.

Dean Naujoks, the Upper Neuse riverkeeper, said that beyond the Ward Transformer site itself, contamination remains and continues to taint fish, which have been found to have high levels of PCBs.

"I feel like this 11-acre site is now under control," said Naujoks, who served on a task force monitoring the cleanup. "The real issue is downstream. What is going to be done about that?"

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IF YOU GO

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is seeking public input on a plan to remove contaminated soil from the Ward Transformer site.

DAY: Wednesday

TIME: 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

PLACE: Morrisville Commerce Building

260 Town Hall Drive, Morrisville

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