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Tackling a toxic threat

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Ward Transformer Sales & Service Inc., a company linked to one of North Carolina's most infamous pollution cases, soon will join the who's who roster of the nation's worst hazardous waste sites, the Superfund national priority list.

Now begins the next chapter of a long-running environmental saga, one that already has cost taxpayers close to \$20 million to clean up contaminated oil illegally sprayed on roadsides 25 years ago. Millions of dollars in additional expenses are likely, and again taxpayers will pick up the tab. Over the years, state and federal investigators have found elevated levels of toxic chemicals -- most notably polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs -- on the company's 11-acre site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport and in adjacent streams. PCBs were added to oil in transformers and other electrical equipment to retard fires until their manufacture was stopped in the United States in 1977 and banned in 1979. They build up in the bodies of animals and can cause health hazards such as skin irritation, liver damage and cancer.

Federal investigators took water and soil samples from the plant site in 1978-79 and 1993, but they said the levels of contamination found did not pose a threat to public health that required immediate removal. In 1997,

state investigators found contamination in a stream and wetlands below the site and recommended further action, which requires the site's inclusion on the Superfund list.

"It was not determined to be an immediate and imminent threat, but it is determined to be a long-term threat," said Jeanette Stanley, environmental chemist for the N.C. Division of Waste Management. "We shouldn't leave it there in perpetuity for someone to happen upon in the future."

Diane Barrett, a spokesperson for EPA, said Superfund would pay to clean up the industrial site, but the agency didn't yet have an estimate of the cost.

Robert E. Ward III, president of the company, did not respond to telephone messages.

The Ward Transformer plant caught the state's attention in 1978 after a contractor hired by the company sprayed 30,000 gallons of oil contaminated with PCBs along more than 200 miles of rural roadsides in 14 counties. That year, new federal regulations had restricted the disposal of PCBs, significantly raising the cost of legal disposal.

The illegal spraying caused a health panic because of the cancer risk of PCBs. State workers dug up the contaminated soil and buried it in a landfill in Warren County over vehement objections of local residents.

Robert "Buck" Ward, father of the company's current president, eventually was convicted of federal charges involving illegal dumping of toxic waste and served nine months in a federal prison. He died in 1996.

In October 1999, the federal and state governments eventually recouped \$3.5 million from "Buck" Ward and his estate to cover the cost of cleaning up the roadsides and building the landfill.

State workers still expect to finish removing PCBs from the oil-soaked soil this fall, although they recently made an unpleasant discovery. The thick layer of clay used to cover the 3-acre landfill also contained low levels of PCBs, state tests revealed. Sampling showed low concentrations of PCBs in basins designed to collect sediment and in sediment that ran off the site during heavy rain last fall.

Meanwhile, the plant site, which is fenced, has remained contaminated. It is in a largely industrial area with no houses within a quarter mile.

"The facility is in compliance with all permits, and the sedimentation basin is operating properly and does control runoff from the site," said Luis Flores, project manager for the Ward Transformer site, based in EPA's Atlanta office. "Most of the contamination outside the property probably happened a long time ago."

Flores said the highest levels of contaminants found on site are 1,200 parts per million in surface soil, and 990 parts per million in sediments in the stormwater collection basin. The EPA considers 50 parts per million or more to be potentially hazardous at a controlled industrial site. Soil with less than 50 parts per million of PCBs can be sent to a regular landfill instead of a hazardous landfill.

Lower amounts of PCBs have been detected in Little Brier Creek downstream, which poses a potential threat to recreational fisheries and wetlands.

Little Brier Creek flows into Brier Creek, which eventually empties into Lake Crabtree, a recreational lake.

"In those areas that have wetlands, we are primarily concerned about environmental effects to the wetlands," Flores said. "That is the reason we are trying to do something before it moves even further."

This spring, investigators will do a more extensive examination of contamination on the site as a prelude to the cleanup, Flores said.

Barrett predicted that it would take two years to start the cleanup.

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MEETING

The EPA will hold a public meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday to provide information about the investigation of the Ward site. The meeting will be at the Morrisville Commerce Building, Suite A, at 260 Town Hall Drive, Morrisville.

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