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Ward site deemed health hazard

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Ward Transformer

Robert E. Ward III

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Article Text:

An EPA investigation of the Ward Transformer site has led a federal agency to declare it a public health hazard and warn that contamination from the site could increase the risk of cancer.

People who eat tainted fish from water downstream from the plant, and plant employees exposed to its chemical-soaked soil, could have an increased risk of cancer and other health problems, said scientists with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, who reviewed the EPA's findings.

"We have notified Ward Transformer about the situation so they can notify their employees," Luis Flores, an EPA project manager who is overseeing the investigation, said Tuesday. Ward employs about 50 people, he said. Robert E. Ward III, president of Ward Transformer Co., could not be reached for comment.

During a yearlong study, investigators found elevated levels of toxic chemicals on the 11-acre Ward site, which is in an industrial area near Raleigh-Durham International Airport. Some soil at the site contains polychlorinated biphenyls, an oily, toxic chemical known as PCBs, at levels more than 50 times the acceptable standards set for industry. EPA is installing monitors to determine whether the chemicals have contaminated groundwater.

Elevated levels of PCBs also turned up in fish in Lake Crabtree and in

creeks that flow into the lake.

"The fish is the biggest issue," said Jill Dyken, an environmental health scientist with the federal health agency. "People are eating the fish in Lake Crabtree or have until recently."

State health officials have posted signs in English and Spanish advising people not to eat catfish and carp from Lake Crabtree and to limit consumption of other fish from the lake to once a month. They also have advised people not to eat any fish from Little Brier Creek downstream of Brier Creek Parkway, Brier Creek and Brier Creek Reservoir.

Environmental investigators Tuesday continued tracking the waterborne pollution farther downstream, collecting fish from Crabtree Creek, which drains Lake Crabtree and flows through Umstead State Park.

Aquatic ecologists Charlie Young and Bob Wagner, of Weston Solutions Inc., a contractor hired by EPA, waded through Crabtree Creek, waving a broom-handled electrical probe in the muddy water to stun fish and scoop them up in dip nets.

"Usually, if you see us fishing, you want to pack up your rod and go somewhere else," Young said.

If the tissue of the fish reveals contamination, state health officials could extend the warning on fish consumption farther downstream. The tissue testing typically takes several months.

Priority for cleanup

Ward Transformer Sales & Service, which reconditions electrical transformers, used processes from 1964 to 1979 that allowed toxic chemicals including PCBs to pollute the land and wash into adjacent streams. The company is linked to one of the state's most infamous pollution cases.

Because of the widespread contamination, the site is on EPA's national priority list for cleanup.

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. Contaminated sediments can move up the food chain into fish and accumulate in the tissue of fish.

Flores said EPA may decide next year on the full extent of the cleanup. No cost estimates have been developed because the full extent of the contamination is not yet known.

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WARD PLANT POLLUTION TIMELINE

1978: The Ward Transformer plant catches the state's attention 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.

1978: State workers dig up the contaminated soil and bury it in a landfill in Warren County over vehement objections of residents there. Robert "Buck" Ward, father of the company's current president, eventually is convicted of federal charges involving illegal dumping of toxic waste and serves nine months in a federal prison.

1993: Federal investigators take water and soil samples from the plant site in 1978-1979 and 1993, but they say the levels of contamination found does not pose a threat to public health that required immediate removal.

1997: State investigators find contamination in a stream and wetlands below the site and recommend further action, which required listing on the Superfund national priority list.

1999: The federal and state governments recoup \$3.5 million from the Ward estate to cover the cost of cleaning up the roadsides and building a

landfill in Warren County.

2003: Ward Transformer site is added to EPA Superfund national priority list.

2003: State health officials issue a warning not to eat fish caught in the lower reaches of Little Brier Creek or Brier Creek reservoir in Wake County because fish taken there had shown high levels of cancer-causing PCBs.

2004: State health officials issue a warning not to eat catfish or carp from Lake Crabtree and to limit consumption of other fish to once a month because of contamination. The Ward Transformer site is declared a public health hazard by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Caption:

Charlie Young grabs a stunned red horse fish from Crabtree Creek. Young collected fish Tuesday to test for PCB contamination as part of an EPA investigation of Ward Transformer Co.

Staff Photos by Chuck Liddy

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