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Ward site cleanup plan advances

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A transformer company whose spills of industrial chemicals polluted Lake Crabtree will share the cost of cleaning up its site with Progress Energy and two other companies that did business with it.

The question of cleaning up the lake itself and other waterways remains unsettled.

The legal settlement, approved by the U.S. Department of Justice, calls for Ward Transformer and the other parties to hire a contractor to remove contaminated soil from the 11-acre industrial site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport. The aim is to stop the further spread of pollution and to protect public health.

The major contaminant is polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a class of toxic chemicals that were added to transformers as coolants until Congress banned them in 1979. Ward's methods of handling PCB-laced oil drained from transformers in the 1960s and 1970s led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks. Waterways downstream, including Lake Crabtree, are posted with warnings about eating fish because of high levels of PCBs.

For years, Ward has claimed it couldn't afford to clean up the high levels of contamination, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency first discovered in the late 1970s. Despite that finding, no cleanup has occurred and the contamination has migrated downstream to contaminate a county park. After The News & Observer reported on the situation in July, local officials demanded that EPA do an expedited cleanup and appointed a group of citizens to monitor the progress of the cleanup.

The agreement requires the companies to provide \$5.4 million to cover the cleanup cost and repay about \$725,000 of EPA's past costs. It does not specify the share that each will provide. That is part of a private agreement among the parties.

"The agreement is significant to EPA in that it gets the ball rolling ...," said Laura Niles, an EPA spokeswoman. "I know we are going to expedite our review to get work started. We understand that it is important to the community to get it cleaned up."

The agreement does not cover cleanup of creeks and water downstream including Lake Crabtree County Park, where fish have been found with high levels of PCBs. EPA has agreed to conduct additional tests in Lake Crabtree to determine the levels of pollution.

Three companies that took transformers to Ward for repair -- Progress Energy, Bassett Furniture Industries, Inc., of Bassett, Va., and CONSOL Energy Inc., of Pittsburgh, Pa. -- signed the agreement along with Ward Transformer and two Ward family companies, Reward Properties and Reward Statesville.

"It's good news for everybody," said Walter Brock Jr., an attorney representing Ward. "We've been able to put together an arrangement to take care of contamination at the site. That is a good thing."

Brock said Ward would have liked to have done something sooner.

"It simply didn't have the resources to do it," Brock said.

The parties have 30 days to submit a work plan. Niles predicted actual removal of contamination would begin in a matter of months. EPA will have final approval of the submitted work plan.

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