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Cancer-causing PCBs spilled onto freeway

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Hundreds of motorists may have been exposed to cancer-causing PCBs when a transformer bounced off the trailer of a truck on Interstate 84 Saturday afternoon, spilling an estimated 13 gallons of the toxic chemical compound onto the freeway.

Authorities said at least half of the 23 remaining transformers on the truck, which had picked up the load in La Grande, also had been leaking an undetermined quantity of the polychlorinated biphenyls.

The eastbound lanes of the freeway were sealed for a five-mile stretch between the Interstate 205 interchange and Fairview at least overnight, while environmental specialists tried to clean up the hazardous chemical spill.

A spokesman for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality who was at the scene said that although the spill was a danger, there probably was no great threat to the public.

"It's not a superserious situation because there was not an excessively high count of PCB," concurred Deputy Ard M. Pratt Jr. of the Multnomah County sheriff's office.

Officials said the concentration of PCBs in the oil that spilled from the transformer was 300 parts per million.

Richard P. Reiter, supervisor of the hazardous waste program for the DEQ, said the serious level is considered to begin at about 500 parts per million. However, the federal Environmental Protection Agency considers 50 parts per million the maximum safe concentration of the compound.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, a family of synthetic compounds, were used for several years as coolants and lubricants in electrical transformers until they were recognized as dangerous substances and banned.

Randy Offield, 31, of Bristol, Va., the driver of the truck, said he was hauling the load of transformers and other large mechanical parts to Missouri and was to have picked up nine more transformers from the Union Pacific Railroad in Portland when one of the transformers fell off the trailer of his truck onto the eastbound lanes of the freeway shortly before 1 p.m. Saturday.

Offield, who was driving for Preventive Chemical Behavior Inc. of Kansas City, Mo., said he was unaware of the mishap until another motorist motioned to the back of his truck.

He said he drove about 1½ miles before he was able to turn around and return to pick up the fallen transformer, which was about 18 inches in diameter and 3 feet tall.



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SPILL SITE — Emergency crews stand by as a transformer containing PCBs sits on side of Interstate 84 after falling off a truck Saturday.

Police dispatchers said they were called about the spill by another motorist at 12:52 p.m. and that Multnomah County sheriff's deputies arrived at the scene at 1:02 p.m. Officer Roger Rothwell of the Bureau of Emergency Communications said dispatchers suspected PCBs might be involved in the spill and alerted the Portland Fire Bureau.

Oregon State Police also responded to the scene to shut off traffic through the area, but sheriff's Sgt. Edward T. Hausafus said the freeway probably wasn't shut down until about 2 p.m., after perhaps hundreds of motorists had passed over the oily material.

The spill covered an area about 250 feet long, but passing cars probably spread the PCBs more than a mile down the freeway, authorities said.

The DEQ and EPA also were called in to supervise cleanup efforts by Oregon Highway Division crews.

The crews spread 25 50-pound bags of absorbent material over the

chemical spill to remove as much as possible from the roadway. A private company, Environmental Emergency Services Co., was contracted to complete the cleanup.

Officials said cleanup crews would use kerosene to scrub the pavement where the spill was concentrated and then resurface about a quarter-mile stretch of the pavement, perhaps Sunday.

The transformers and other mechanical equipment were loaded onto wooden pallets bound with metal straps on an open panel trailer. The open end of the trailer was loosely slung with ropes.

Authorities said the leaking transformers would be loaded in steel containers and that Offield, who was cited for having an insecure load, would be allowed to drive them to an authorized disposal site in Nevada.

Additional details on Page C1.



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CLEANING UP — Randy Offield of Bristol, Va., driver of a truck loaded with transformers containing PCBs, is decontaminated Saturday by members of the Portland Fire Bureau's Hazardous Materials Unit. Transformer fell from truck, spilling an estimated 13 gallons of toxic chemical on I-84.