

FROM :

FAX NO. : 2128744333

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Media

Major Oil Spills at Ground Zero

Juan Gonzalez

More than 130,000 gallons of oil from transformers and high-voltage lines _ most of it containing low levels of hazardous PCBs _ were lost at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 when two downtown Con Edison substations were destroyed.

In addition to the Con Ed release, confirmed by company spokesman Mike Clendenin, the Port Authority is unable to account for 50,000 of 70,000 gallons of diesel and fuel oil stored in belowground tanks at the Trade Center complex to power emergency generators.

As much as 180,000 gallons of flammable oil _ roughly equivalent to 10 times the amount of jet fuel in the two airliners that crashed into the twin towers _ may be feeding the fires that have been burning for more than two months at the site.

Con Ed and Port Authority officials say they don't know whether the contaminants seeped into the soil, burned or drained off into the Hudson River. Environmental Protection Agency officials confirmed they are searching for the oil and pumping it out when they find it.

A private environmental data firm hired by the city to report on known hazardous materials at the Trade Center warned in a letter to federal and state environmental officials this week that the oil "could be fueling the onsite fires."

A copy of the letter from Walter Hang, president of Ithaca, N.Y.-based Toxics Targeting Inc., was obtained by the Daily News.

"That's exactly what's burning," said a Fire Department source. "All that fuel, all those cars that were in parking lots down there, all kinds of stuff."

Information Not Released

On Monday, Carl Johnson, deputy commissioner for air and waste management for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, told an Assembly hearing on downtown air quality, "I don't believe that we saw anything that involved a large quantity of PCBs."

After the hearing, when informed by a reporter that both Con Ed and the Port Authority said they notified the DEC about a half-dozen incidents involving oil or natural gas releases, Johnson replied: "I'm not aware of that."

DEC officials have not released any information on Trade Center environmental contamination since Sept. 11.

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According to Clendenin, Con Ed lost 30,000 gallons of dielectric fluid _ essentially mineral oil _ from several high-voltage lines when 7 World Trade Center collapsed. The building's fall late in the afternoon of Sept. 11 may have resulted from a raging fire fed by fuel from the storage tanks beneath the building, according to some familiar with the Trade Center complex.

In addition, 100,000 gallons of insulating oil containing PCBs spilled from large transformers and capacitors when the substations behind 7 WTC were destroyed.

"To the best of our knowledge, those transformer oils contained 1 to 10 parts per million of PCBs," Clendenin said _ considerably below the state danger level of 50 parts per million.

Production of PCBs _ polychlorinated biphenyls _ has been banned in the U.S. since 1977, when the federal government declared them dangerous to human health. But many PCBs are still found in old transformers, industrial equipment and fluorescent lighting fixtures.

Exposure to high levels of PCBs for brief periods can result in acnelike skin conditions in adults and neurobehavioral and immunological problems in children.

Long-term exposure can cause cancer, according to the federal Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry.

But even low levels of PCBs could signal environmental problems in the presence of an uncontrolled fire, say both Hang and environment officials.

"The incomplete combustion of PCBs could be a source" of dioxins, Hang wrote in his Nov. 25 letter, and that "could pose a grave threat to the health of those working on or near the site, as well as those living nearby."

EPA monitoring reports have shown levels of dioxin around the WTC site exceed safety levels for what the agency calls a "30-year exposure period." A handful of readings have been above safety levels for a one-year exposure _ meaning constant exposure over a year could result in serious health problems.

EPA spokeswoman Mary Helen Cervantes said the agency expected to see increased dioxin levels at a major fire like the one at the Trade Center.

"We're definitely concerned about any possible toxic substances that are being released down there," she said.

So far, Con Ed's estimate of the low PCB content in its lost oil has not been verified by the DEC or any other independent agency.

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In September 1998, the utility reported there were no PCBs in any of the oil released from a transformer fire at its Arthur Kill power station. Only later was it learned that the oil contained 306,000 parts per million of PCBs. Con Ed paid a \$500,000 fine this year and signed a new consent decree with the state on environmental monitoring.

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