

NEWS RELEASE

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LOW LEVELS OF PCBs DETECTED IN LEAKED THE DALLES DAM TRANSFORMER OIL

PORTLAND, ORE. – Follow-on tests of the mineral oil that leaked from a spare transformer Dec. 23 at The Dalles Lock and Dam on the Columbia River near The Dalles, Ore., have detected extremely low levels of polychlorinated biphenyls. PCBs are a suspected human health carcinogen and bioaccumulate in the food chain.

The unified U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Washington Department of Ecology incident management team overseeing the cleanup initially reported no PCBs in the transformer oil based on the results of a 2003 test, which could detect PCBs at levels down to 2 parts per million. However, more sensitive post-spill tests ordered by incident managers revealed PCBs at 0.45 ppm.

“This is an older transformer that contained PCB-tainted oil at one point, like most transformers of the day,” said Ken Duncan, environmental compliance coordinator for the Portland District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates The Dalles Lock and Dam. “Although the transformer had been thoroughly rehabilitated and the oil most recently loaded into it was PCB-free, apparently traces of PCBs remained and tainted the current oil.”

Environmental and public health agencies’ regulations vary as to what constitutes acceptable concentrations of PCBs. For transformers and other equipment, federal regulation is generally triggered by concentrations in oil at or above 50 ppm. However, for decontamination purposes, federal regulations require that water containing PCBs must be below 0.003 ppm to be discharged to navigable waters. The State of Washington cleanup level for PCBs in surface water is 0.000014 ppm and the Safe Drinking Water Act level is 0.0005 parts per million.

Recent tests of water in the dam’s ice and trash sluiceway near the spill site were unable to detect PCBs at a level of 0.00002 ppm.

One part per million is roughly the equivalent of one teaspoon per 1,300 gallons. Technical specialists estimate this spill has added about one one-hundredth of a teaspoon of PCBs to the river.

“Any release of PCBs to the Columbia River is a concern, because it adds to existing PCB contamination in the river,” said Mark Layman, state on-scene coordinator for the Washington Department of Ecology and a member of the unified command team managing the response. “Preventing additional releases of contamination is the primary goal of our cleanup efforts.”

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Incident managers have consulted with federal and state environmental agencies, state and county public health agencies, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and other interested parties regarding the potential effects of the PCBs added to the river on public health and the environment.

For more information on PCBs and their health effects, see
<http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/hazard/tsd/pcbs/index.htm>.

For more information about the spill response efforts, see
http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/incidents/dallesdam_leak09/index.html.