Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) FACTS

What are PCBs?

PCBs are a group of man-made compounds that were widely used in the past, mainly in electrical equipment, because of their non-flammability and stability. PCBs have no taste or smell and range in consistency from oil to a waxy solid. Their manufacturing was banned in 1979 because of growing environmental and health concerns.

PCBs and the Environment

PCBs can still be found in the environment. Levels of PCBs currently exist in the air, soil, and water from previous releases. Because of their stability, PCBs do not break down in the environment. They often attach to sediment that is washed into local waterways, such as the Roanoke River, where they accumulate in living organisms.

Products that may contain PCBs

Although no longer commercially produced, PCBs may be present in products and materials made before the 1979 PCBs ban. Products that may contain PCBs include:

- Transformers and capacitors
- Electrical equipment (voltage regulators, switches, re-closers, bushings, etc.)
- Oil used in motors and hydraulic systems
- Old electrical devices or appliances containing capacitors having PCBs
- Fluorescent light ballasts
- Cable insulation
- Thermal insulation material including fiberglass, felt, foam, and cork
- Adhesives and tapes
- Oil-based paint
- Caulking
- Plastics
- Floor finish

Preventing the Release of PCBs

Caution must be taken to prevent PCBs from being released through:

- Spills and leaks from electrical and other equipment
- Improper disposal and storage
- Illegal or improper dumping of wastes containing PCBs
- Burning wastes containing PCBs

It is important to minimize the amount of PCBs in the environment by:

- Properly replacing all fluorescent light ballasts containing PCBs
- Properly disposing of caulk, paint, and other building materials with PCBs during planned renovations and repairs
- Taking precautions during renovations so that building materials with PCBs do not contaminate surrounding surfaces
- Using properly trained and licensed contractors to remove, clean-up, and dispose of materials containing PCBs
- Consulting with regulatory officials when questions arise regarding PCBs

More Information on PCBs

To learn more about PCBs visit:

- Virginia Department of Environmental Quality https://www.deq.state.va.us
- Environmental Protection Agency https://www.epa.gov/pcbs

Older Fluorescent light ballasts (FLBs) can contain PCBs. Because of this, FLBs should be removed and disposed of by trained professionals.

Transformers containing PCBs, which contain more than 50 ppm of PCBs, are subject to specific EPA regulations. Proper PCBs identification labels must be visible near the access and on the transformer itself.

Old paint and caulk and surrounding substrate (brick, masonry, cinder block, wood, etc.) contain PCBs. Care must be taken during removal of these materials to avoid the creation of dust and to contain contaminated waste.

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