

Tanana fears PCB contamination

By Bill Hess

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Tanana residents fear that PCB (poly-chlorinated biphenyls) contamination from a nearby U.S. Air Force radar station may have reached their village. During testing at the White Alice Bear Creek Radar Station, located about nine miles from the village, Air Force officials last summer found what they described as a small amount of PCB contamination in the soil.

PCBs have been proven to cause cancer, miscarriages, stillbirths, and other reproduction problems, as well as skin rash and liver disease.

In a strongly worded letter calling upon the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to take whatever steps are necessary to determine if there has been any contamination in the village, Alfred Grant noted that there has been cancer and other illnesses associated with PCB in the village.

Grant, who is president of the Tanana Indian Reorganization Act Native Council was out of town and could not be reached, but Eva Walsh Edwardsen, a council staff member, agreed that health problems in the village are unusual enough that questions need to be asked.

"Since the summer of 1980, there have been three miscarriages and five reproductive problems," she said, noting that her figures were unofficial.

"From 1981 to 1984, there have been five deaths, and three of them were of cancer," Edwardsen said.

"There is now one person in the village, a young person, who has cancer." Tanana has a population of about 600, mostly Athabascans.

Earlier, the council passed a resolution calling upon the Air Force, the Alaska Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Public Health Service to make a variety of tests, ranging from cancer tests of human, plant and animal tissue to soil sampling to determine if there is PCB contamination in the village.

Villagers fear that waste oil from the radar station which has been used to oil roads in the village could have brought toxic wastes into the community. Further, they fear that contamination could have entered the water and food chain through the waters of Bear Creek.

"There was a very limited area with contaminated soil found at the White Alice Radar Site," said Captain Tom Christie, as spokesperson for the U.S. Air Force at Elmendorf. The site was closed in January of 1979, Christie said. Toxic waste cleanup was completed by July of 1981 and the contaminated area was discovered last August.

Christie said that the Air Force will conduct a series on any questionable oils, soil sam-

ples and village roads this coming July to determine if there has been any contamination. If so, the Air Force will have the responsibility to clean it up.

Wade Kalloch, a Native of Tanana who now lives in Fairbanks was once employed oiling down village roads. Kalloch feels testing should begin immediately.

"This is something that is unproven," Kalloch said, "but I have a feeling that somehow there is PCB or another toxic substance in Tanana." Kalloch said he has studied the PCB situation. While he has been learning about the subject for the past couple of years, his interest has intensified over the past month.

Kalloch said that the research he has done has led him to be-

lieve there are serious health problems in Tanana which he believes must be attributed to a source such as PCB. But he said he has been advised by Alaska Legal Services staff not to speak publicly about his information now.

"There are some highly personal things here," he explained, claiming that revealing them would violate the privacy of some villagers.

Grant addressed his letter plus a copy of the council's resolution to Frank Madison at the BIA area office in Juneau. Madison, the environmental coordinator, declined to discuss the matter, referring it to public affairs officer Glenn Robertson.

Robertson said Madison will be going to Tanana later this

month to investigate. "We are going with an open mind rather than with any predisposition," Robertson said.

"We have no idea if there is any problem, or to what extent it is, if there is anything."

Responsibility for cleanup belongs to the Air Force, Robertson said.

"There isn't really an awful lot for us to do, other than to serve as an advocate for the Native community," Robertson said. Robertson said that testing would "pretty well have to wait until breakup. He also described PCB as a current favorite horror story, saying that when a PCB scare started by contamination in Akiak subsides, some other type of scare would take its place. "Maybe ECB's," Robertson speculated.