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## 1991 PCB Incident: 20 Years Later

**Issue:** Because the health and safety of our students is our number one priority, we have prepared this fact sheet to provide students and parents with our assessment of the potential health risks to students from the 1991 Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCB) accident that occurred on campus in Bliss, Gage and Scudder residence halls and the Parker Theatre and Coykendall Science Building.

**The New York State Department of Health and the Ulster County Department of Health have continued to assure the college that there is no reason for concern.** Students, visitors and workers at New Paltz are NOT being exposed to elevated PCB contamination on campus. This conclusion is based on the results of the long-term and ongoing testing program for PCBs in these buildings and the scientific assessment of the potential health risks from PCBs by the state Department of Health and the Ulster County Department of Health.

**History:** On Dec. 29, 1991, a power “spike” resulting from an off-campus traffic accident seriously damaged electrical transformers in five buildings on campus. The oil in the transformers contained polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs. Some of the oil spilled directly onto the floors of the transformer vaults and limited amounts spread through the buildings as smoke or vapor.

Under the oversight of the county and state health departments, the college conducted a thorough clean-up effort in each of the five buildings: Bliss, Gage and Scudder residence halls; Parker Theatre; and Coykendall Science Building. Capen Hall was cleaned for different reasons. Tests determined that the building did not require cleaning, but smoke was reported during the incident and so it was cleaned similar to the other dorms affected by the PCB incident. Clean Harbors, a state-certified testing firm from Massachusetts, which was approved by both the NYS Department of Health (DOH) and the Ulster County Health Department, was hired to take air and surface wipe samples. University officials requested advice from the Ulster County Health Department and the NYS DOH on guidelines for determining when the buildings were clean enough to allow students/faculty to re-occupy the buildings. The NYS DOH had extensive experience in deriving objective, science-based guidelines for re-occupancy of a building contaminated with dioxins and PCBs. In 1985, the NYS DOH developed, with the advice of an external expert panel of doctors and scientists, re-entry guidelines for a state office building contaminated during a major transformer fire in the building’s basement. The guidelines were based on levels of dioxins and PCBs in indoor air and

on indoor surfaces that people would touch when in the building (i.e., desktops, walls, floors).

Other groups have developed cleanup guidelines for PCBs and dioxins. In 1987, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued final regulations for their PCB Spill Cleanup Policy under the Toxic Substances Control Act. Under this regulation, the cleanup requirement for PCBs on surfaces in areas where access is unrestricted (i.e., inside residential or commercial properties) is 10 times less stringent than re-entry guideline for PCBs on surfaces derived by the NYS DOH. In 1988, a committee of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences reviewed existing re-entry guidelines for dioxin contamination in office buildings following transformer fires and recommended dioxin air and surface guidelines that were identical to, and based primarily on, those derived by NYS DOH.

Based on these assessments and sampling data that indicated that the primary contaminants in the building were PCBs, the Ulster County Health Department and the NYS DOH recommended that the more stringent NYS DOH re-entry guidelines for PCBs be used to determine when students/faculty could re-occupy the cleaned buildings. They also recommended that the buildings could be reopened once measured levels were below the surface and air guidelines for PCBs. SUNY New Paltz agreed to these recommendations.

As an additional precaution, 29 other buildings on campus were thoroughly tested. Six separate laboratories certified by New York State for analysis of PCBs in air and surface samples were involved in testing and re-testing campus buildings. The cleanup and remediation lasted from 1992 to 1995. The extent and the comprehensiveness of the cleanup are reflected in the estimated cleanup cost of \$50 million. By 1993, all affected residence halls had been blessed by health officials as safe for re-occupancy.

**Monitoring:** The college continues to use the re-occupancy criteria when samples are collected to evaluate the potential health risks from PCBs on campus today. Since the cleanup, surface wipe tests and air sample tests are conducted regularly as part of the maintenance and monitoring program established by Clean Harbors. More testing was done in 1997, 1998, 2001, 2005 and 2009. All results from these tests were below the re-occupancy cleanup criteria. All tests in the residence halls passed the stringent post-incident cleanup levels established by New York State. The results continue to demonstrate that encapsulated surfaces remain below the cleanup criterion of 1 microgram per 100 square centimeters – criterion that is 10 times more stringent than the Federal EPA criterion. In an agreement with the county and state health departments, the college is currently on a four-year testing cycle. The next round of testing is scheduled for 2013.

New Paltz will carry out its routine monitoring and inspection program for the life of these buildings. Routine maintenance will enable students and individuals to live in a

clean dormitory environment. If any safety issues arise during the future monitoring or testing of any of these areas, the college will notify the entire campus community.

### **SUNY New Paltz Today:**

Several steps have been taken to ensure that there is no reason for concern related to PCBs at New Paltz today.

- The re-occupancy guidelines were established before cleanup and environmental testing was completed. The guidelines were based solely on protection of human health.
- Environmental testing was done immediately after the incident to determine the extent and nature of contamination. Environmental testing was done after the cleanup to determine if the re-occupancy guidelines were met. Once students were allowed back into the building, routine monitoring in former transformer vaults and electrical rooms was instituted. The results of the latest round of routine testing in 2009 were below the guidelines. To date, more than 12,000 wipe and air samples have been collected and analyzed.
- Testing of the building areas has been extensive and comprehensive. Areas tested to determine if the re-occupancy guidelines were met included but not limited to furniture; walls; floors; sinks; backs of heaters; hallways; file cabinet interiors; ventilation system duct work and transformer vaults.
- In August 1994, New Paltz became the first SUNY campus to totally eliminate PCB transformers from campus. Furthermore, all PCB-containing light fixtures were also removed by 1995.
- The residence halls continue to be maintained as clean, attractive living spaces.

### **Activists raise health issue after 16 years**

In the spring of 2007, a handful of student activists and alumni raised concerns that the levels of PCBs in a number of our residence halls were unsafe. This group demanded publicly that the college immediately conduct testing for PCBs without ever approaching the college about this issue. The college, however, gives greater credence to the results of the current testing program for PCBs in these buildings and the assessment of the potential health risks from PCBs by scientists with the New York State Department of Health (NYS DOH) and the Ulster County Health Department.

To allay the concerns of these individuals, the college arranged for state and county health officials and PCB cleanup experts to meet with the concerned individuals to provide them with information about the cleanup and subsequent testing. At the conclusion of the two meetings, the group had no more questions and appeared to be satisfied with the information that the scientists and other administrators shared.

As a result of these meetings, and upon the recommendation of the state and county health officials, the college prepared a document that summarizes all historical data related to the cleanup and testing in a PCB Executive Summary. The college was also asked to provide a user-friendly index and electronically scan these files to ensure greater security and public accessibility to the files. A state-certified company involved in the cleanup and testing, Clean Harbors of Massachusetts, was hired by the college to prepare the executive summary of the college's PCB files.

The files (including the PCB Executive Summary) are now available online at:  
<http://www.newpaltz.edu/healthcenter/pcbupdate.html>

Because the files are now accessible online, the hard copies have been returned to the Special Collections Room at the library. They are available for viewing by appointment. To make an appointment, please call (845) 257-3719.

**For more information:** If you have additional questions, you may contact L. David Rooney, Vice President for Student Affairs, at 257-3260 or Mike Malloy, director of Environmental Health & Safety, at (845) 257-3310. SUNY New Paltz wants you to be comfortable with your child's living environment and would be happy to talk with you about it. Additional questions may also be directed to the Ulster County Department of Health (Environmental Health Department) at (845) 340-3010 or the New York State Health Department at (800) 458-1158 Environmental Indoor Air Quality Department.