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Park's soil is highly toxic

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By TONY SCLAFANI
GANNETT NEW JERSEY

SOUTH PLAINFIELD: A high level of contaminants has been discovered at a closed borough park where a tarlike substance is oozing from the ground, authorities said yesterday.

Concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, phenol, cadmium, chromium and lead were found in two soil samples taken by Edison Wetlands Association, a nonprofit environmental preservation group, according to results cited by the group's executive director, Robert Spiegel.

Borough officials closed the park a week ago, citing an environmental investigation into possibly hazardous substances at the park, which had been used as a landfill about 50 years ago. Chunks of exposed asbestos also have been found at the rear edge of the park along the Bound Brook, authorities said.

While concentrations of the contaminants do not pose an immediate threat, the combination of the substances should concern residents about long-term effects, especially those with children who have repeatedly visited the park in the past, experts said.

"They're (the substances) all bad. I wouldn't choose to live there. I wouldn't choose to interact there if I had a choice," said Brian Buckley, executive director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute, part of Rutgers University and the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark.

"This is not a healthy place for kids to play. There's no doubt about it," said Buckley, who recommended examining and monitoring some children for any effects.

Children had been playing at the park, equipped with baseball field, basketball court and playground equipment, as part of the borough's summer camp program until the park was closed last week.

Within the samples, 5 parts per million of PCBs was found, 10 times above the state standard for unrestricted land use, said Fred Mumford, a state Department of Environmental Protection. "It's above our cleanup criteria, but it's still a low-level contamination," he said.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency conducted testing at the park in August 2001, but did not find PCBs or any connection with the Hamilton Industrial Park, a Superfund site which contained high levels of PCBs, Mumford said.



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Pools of a sticky, black ooze that have spread throughout the park -- and have been there for years, residents say -- have been determined to be some type of petroleum product and will be removed when officials finalize a plan, Mumford said.

Fencing has been erected around the most concentrated areas of the ooze, and soil was dumped on top of it last week to prevent any human contact. It is unclear when the park may be reopened. But Spiegel wants officials to post signs warning of the substances.

"Just to have the sign that basically says the park is closed does not give people information. That basically tells kids to come on in because kids love to go where they're not supposed to," he said.

In a memorandum of agreement signed in May 2002, state officials began working with the borough's environmental consultant, PMK Group of Cranford, to find the best remedy for the site, Mumford said. He said further testing is needed to address a plan for a complete remediation of the site.

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