DEQ says contaminants may have leaked from pits

The Department of Environmental Quality now believes that much of the worst pollution in the Calcasieu Estuary may have leaked from old disposal pits at PPG Industries rather than building up from years of legal discharges.

Hexachlorobenzene and hexachlorobutadiene apparently were spilled or seeped into a canal that flows into Bayou D’Inde, part of the Calcasieu River system, according to state environmental officials and the attorney general’s office.

PPG Industries in Lake Charles referred all calls to spokesman Chuck Bellon, who did not return a message left with his office.

Warnings against eating trout have been posted along miles of waterways in the area because high levels of two cancer-causing chemicals have been found in the flesh of the fish.

Those two contaminants are the same kind of chemicals discharged by PPG into the canal.

Information about extensive underground contamination at the site could lead to civil penalties, including fines.

PPG has proposed cleanup plans under a previous legal agreement with the state that attributed the pollution to long-term discharges allowed by state and federal permits.

That agreement protected PPG against penalties during a cleanup effort ordered by the Department of Environmental Quality.

DEQ reserved the right to change the agreement after public comment and review, said Tom Killeen, of DEQ’s water quality division. When the agreement first was worked out, representatives from the attorney general’s office said they were pleased with it, in part because they had avoided lengthy litigation.

“Subsequent to public comments and data provided by PPG, we have found that the contamination was not from permitted discharges,” Killeen said.

Tuesday. “The permitted discharges may be an insignificant portion of the problem.”

Killeen said the firm had cooperated well with DEQ in studying the extent of the canal contamination and proposing a plan to divert water from the canal in a cleanup effort.

Studies conducted by PPG showed that every day the plant had discharged two-thirds of a pound of the toxic chemicals hexachlorobenzene and hexachlorobutadiene into a canal next to company property.

About three pounds of the chemicals

SEE PPG, 2B
Some DEQ departments knew of the extensive underground water contamination prior to the agreement with PPG to clean up the canal pollution, Killeen said.

“It just was never all tied together,” he noted.

In May, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cited PPG for 29 violations for allegedly discharging too much mercury and other toxic chemicals into the Calcasieu River system.

The agency also charged that PPG failed to comply with federal orders and missed a deadline for installing water treatment equipment. EPA proposed no fines for those alleged violations.

In August, the agency tentatively denied a PPG request for permission to discharge more of two chemicals, EDC and chloroform, into the water.

PPG claimed its operations are substantially different than those considered by EPA in drafting discharge limits, and that difference made it impossible for PPG to meet those limits.

Earlier this month, PPG challenged new state water regulations in court, claiming that the rules are based on overly conservative assumptions about the dangers posed to humans by chemical discharges into waterways. DEQ officials had hailed the new regulations as a victory for human health and the environment.

Trash pickup

The city-parish special trash crew began operating Tuesday in Metro Council District 10, represented by Darrell Glasper, according to the public information office.

The special trash crews operate only inside the city limits.