

Drums found near Woburn wells, jury told

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By Jerry Ackerman
Globe Staff

A federal court jury was told yesterday how geologists and chemists found abandoned drums leaking oily and tarlike substances on land in Woburn within 600 feet of the two city wells implicated in that city's leukemia deaths.

The drums were found during

an investigation of a 15-acre parcel of land formerly owned by the Beatrice Foods Co., one of two defendants in the civil suit brought by eight families who claim the polluted water from the city wells made them ill and led to the death of five children from leukemia.

John C. Drobinski, a geologist who led that investigation last summer for a consulting firm hired by the plaintiffs' families,

also told of finding pesticide container caps and a label from a container of an industrial solvent found in those wells.

But objections by Beatrice's lawyers prevented Drobinski from beginning to testify about whether there is evidence that the drums were dumped on the property before the wells were found contaminated in May 1979 and shut down by state authorities.

Drobinski, who works for Weston Geophysical Corp. in Westborough, is the first material witness called by the plaintiffs in the trial that began Monday before Judge Walter Jay Skinner in US District Court in Boston.

Beatrice, based in Chicago, owned the 15-acre parcel along with the nearby John J. Riley leather tannery between 1978 and 1983 and assumed responsibility for environmental problems on both those properties.

Both Beatrice and its codefendant, W.R. Grace & Co., which operates a packaging machinery plant a half mile from the wells, deny they caused the pollution or the sickness.

Skinner has told the six-member jury that before it considers the medically controversial charge that solvents in drinking water can lead to leukemia, it must first determine whether the two companies are responsible for the pollution.

If the jury absolves the two firms of pollution, the trial will end. But if it goes along with the families' contention that the companies authorized or condoned disposal of solvents that got into the wells, the trial could go on through the summer.

WOBURN WELLS CLOSED



The remains of two Woburn wells, contaminated since 1979, are scattered over site after being bulldozed yesterday. In a suit under way in federal court, a geologist testified that leaky barrels were found in an inspection of the area. Page 82.

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