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By BRIDGET SCRIMENTI, Sun Staff

WESTFORD -- Fire and school officials are trying to figure out what caused a major spill of heating oil at the Abbot Elementary School yesterday.

The spill was discovered by a janitor early yesterday morning in the boiler room. Luckily, the school building was empty because of Christmas vacation.

Firefighters and members of the Highway Department rushed to the scene with containment booms to control the spill. About 500 to 1,000 gallons of oil spilled from the tank, which held a total of 10,000 gallons of oil.

Assistant Superintendent of Schools Bill Olsen said the cause of the spill is under investigation, but he believes either the oil tank ruptured or a pipe feeding oil into the tank burst.

The heating oil leaked into a water-drainage pipe that runs underground from the Abbot School to the Millennium School administration building, directly behind Abbot. The pipe then empties out behind the Millennium School building, into the woods and down a hill. Providence Road is at the bottom of the hill, and all residents there have private well water.

Darren MacCaughey, director of Westford's Environmental Services, said the spill could affect water in a dozen homes on Providence Road. MacCaughey hand-delivered letters advising residents to drink bottled water. A handful of residents surveyed by *The Sun* were apprehensive but not overly concerned about the oil spill.

"I'm not really worried," said Nicole Frechette, who was visiting her family's Providence Road home. "I bought bottled water just in case."

The state Department of Environmental Protection is also investigating the spill.



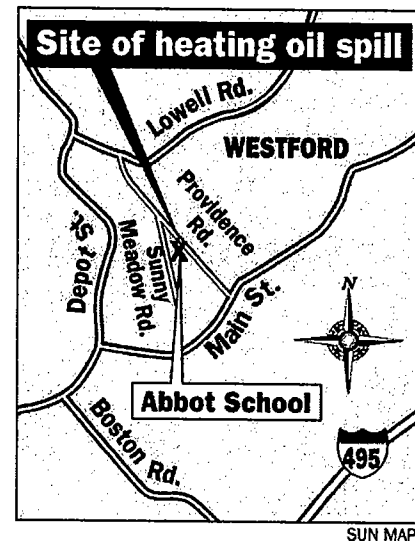
Westford firefighters Bill Cashman, left, and Don Parsons place containment booms in a stream in woods behind the Abbot School to contain an oil spill at the school yesterday. SUN/JON HILL



Joe Ferson, a spokesperson for the state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, said the oil used by the school is number 4 heating oil, which is heavy and would take longer to penetrate the ground than other types of heating oil. Ferson said that because the oil spill was discovered so quickly, it is highly unlikely the oil seeped into private well water.

"Migration to well water takes time, especially with number 4 oil," said Ferson. "There is a low possibility that the oil has impacted the wells."

The School Department hired the environmental service company ENPRO Services Inc. to contain and clean up the spill. As of yesterday afternoon, ENPRO planned to test area wells for contamination and hoped to have results in the next few days, according to Account Manager Joe Pallotta.



The Abbot School uses public water, which was not affected by the oil spill. Olsen hopes to replace the oil tank this week and said the Abbot's heating system has the ability to convert to natural-gas heat while the oil tank is being replaced. The quality of air inside the Abbot School will also be tested.

Olsen is checking whether or not the School Department's insurance policy covers oil spills. He said the town might have to borrow money from the state to finance the environmental cleanup and purchase a new fuel tank. Under Chapter 44, section 31, schools are allowed to request authorization to spend money to fix an emergency situation, according to Olsen.

The estimated cost of the cleanup, new fuel tank and new heating oil will most likely exceed \$100,000, which is more than the Finance Committee's reserve fund could handle, said Olsen.

As of yesterday afternoon, Olsen was not sure if the reopening of the Abbot School, scheduled for Tuesday, will be delayed. Olsen said he's thankful the spill happened when school was not in session.



Westford firefighter David Christiana carries a containment boom into the woods behind Abbot School yesterday.
SUN/JON HILL

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