ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

DSW 136316

MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 1988

Monsanto Leak Injures Scores

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Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A chemical leak at a Monsanto Co. plant in Sauget on Sunday sent more than 100 people to Metro East hospitals for treatment of minor illnesses.

The leak was the second chemical accident reported at the plant in less than four months. Both accidents this year involved a chemical called phosphorous trichloride, which is used in agricultural chemicals.

A spokeswoman for Monsanto said most of the people were treated and released Sunday. Several were hospitalized for observation.

"Apparently the material forms a vapor that did go in the direction of East St. Louis," said the spokeswoman, Diane Bartolanzo.

The chemical leaked from a storage tank for five minutes — from 7:35 to 7:40 a.m. — apparently because of a ruptured disk on the tank for the finished product, Bartolanzo said.

She said three gallons had leaked from the tank — not enough to call for an evacuation of the area. But the plant's alarm was sounded as a precaution.

East St. Louis Mayor Carl Officer said the city's emergency service and disaster agency was investigating the leak. He said he expected a full report by midday today. Officer said he anticipated cooperation from Monsanto in finding out what happened.

"They've always been very open about letting us see their reports," Officer said.

Officer said he was concerned, but added: "It happens all the time. It would happen even if Monsanto wasn't here."

He said chemical fumes also blow across the river from a Mallinckrodt Inc. chemical plant off Interstate 70 in St. Louis.

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Leak

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"The river isn't a boundary when it comes to chemical fumes," Officer said. "People who live in this area are used to that."

A nursing supervisor at Gateway Community Hospital in East St. Louis said 14 people had been treated and released for runny noses and eyes and coughing. Three people were admitted to the hospital for closer observation.

Bartolanzo said 65 people had been treated and released at St. Mary's in East St. Louis. Hospital officials at Centreville Township Hospital in Centreville said 25 people had been treated and released.

Kava Beck, 19, of Lynch Street in East St. Louis, said she was outside Pilgrim Green Missionary Baptist Church, 1028 Mississippi Avenue, at about 10 a.m. Sunday helping set up for the morning service when she saw "pieces of smoke in the sky."

"All of the sudden I started coughing," Beck said. "My little 2-year-old girl started throwing up."

Her mother, Senora Beck, who also was at the church, said: "I smelled sort of like a heavy odor in the air. The kids started coughing. It made me sick to my stomach."

Kava Beck said she was angry about the spill.

"This is my second time coming to the hospital because of a chemical leak," she said. "I am highly upset. My girl hasn't eaten anything all day. It's bad for a child not to eat anything all day just because of a chemical spill."

Beck, who recently gave birth to a girl, said she had had complications during her pregnancy. She said her doctor attributed her problems to the chemical spill at the plant in April.

Earnstine Dean, 28, of Lebanon Avenue in Belleville, also was helping clean the church yard when "I started feeling something inside like a bad smell and started vomiting."

Dean and the Becks were interviewed as they awaited treatment Sunday night at Centreville Township Hospital.

In April of this year, a railroad tanker at the same plant was overfilled with phosphorous trichloride. About 300 gallons of the chemical spilled to the ground and hundreds of families had to be evacuated. About 200 people sought medical attention.

Following is a review of chemical accidents that have happened since 1980 at the Monsanto Co.'s Sauget plant.

- April 17, 1988 — The overfilled railroad tanker overflowed.
- Sept. 4, 1987 — Fumes from a chemical spill at the plant sent 52 residents of East St. Louis to emergency rooms complaining of breathing problems. All were treated and released. About 10 pounds of concentrated sulfuric acid was spilled in the accident.
- April 8, 1987 — A chemical leak sparked a fire at the plant. Two mildly toxic chemicals — phosphorous pentasulfide and phosphorous pentoxide — were spilled. No injuries were reported.
- March 3, 1986 — A chemical leak at the plant sent an employee to the hospital for observation. One hundred pounds of chlorosulfonic acid was spilled.
- Jan. 22, 1984 — About 5,400 gallons of phosphorous oxychloride spilled to the ground, apparently after a piece of ice fell and severed a nozzle from a tank. About 100 people were treated and released. The accident was so large that it had to be reported to the Environmental Protection Agency.

STLCOPCB4036282