Villain Is Dioxin. Relocation Is Response. E

By ADAM NOSSITER

PENSACOLA, Fla. — Day after day for 40 years, the dark pine logs lay gleaming in the Florida sun, stretching back to the rail tracks almost as far as the eye could see.

Neighbors of the Escambia Treating Company in the black working-class area at the edge of this port city in the Florida Panhandle thought nothing of it: the plant meant jobs, and besides, blacks could not live just anywhere.

But the logs, telephone poles in the making, were dripping chemical preservatives, first creosote, then pentachlorophenol. In 1991, long after the company went bankrupt, an emergency team from the Environmental Protection Agency dug up the toxic mess, piled it into a 60-foot-high mound laced with dioxin and other chemicals, and stored it tight under a polyethylene cover.

That was not enough for neighbors of the old wood-treating plant, fearful that their backyards had become contaminated by dioxin, a potentially cancer-causing agent. For four years they demanded to be moved, and in October, the Federal agency agreed.

It plans to spend about $18 million relocating people from 158 houses and 200 apartments. Agency officials say they are unsure about when the move will take place but hope to accomplish it within a year. It would be the third largest move of private citizens the agency has undertaken, after the relocations at Times Beach, Mo., and at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, N.Y., both in the 1980's.

The relocation plan is striking for other reasons. One senior agency scientist who supports the move asserted that it had been ordered by the White House because of the elections this year, provoking dissension within the agency. Other agency officials vehemently disputed the assertion. Another scientist at the agency suggested that it had deliberately lowered its health-risk standards here, in part because of the Florida site's notoriety. An agency engineer, who also supports the decision, predicted that the decision would have significant long-term effects.

"The policy implications of Escambia are incredible," said the engineer, Hugh Kaufman. "Everybody who lives near a site with that amount of material is going to say, 'Move us.' There are places that are more contaminated than Escambia, that have no evacuation."

By all accounts, what happened here in this neighborhood of small brick homes is unusual. Faced with steady pressure from organized residents, who had made the site a national cause célèbre, the environmental agency amended its first plan twice this year, adding more families to those it had originally said were at risk from dioxin. The agency had already invoked a standard using a far smaller amount of the chemical than normal to decide that the residents were in danger, said one senior agency scientist.



Lee Celano for The New York Times

Margaret Williams heads a citizens group that pressured the Federal Government to agree to relocate people from 158 houses and 200 apartments whose property was exposed to dioxin in Pensacola, Fla.

And now officials are not even certain that dioxin will ultimately be invoked to justify part, or all, of the move, said the scientist, Elmer Akin, chief of the office of technical services in the agency's Atlanta district. "We may or may not need dioxin to drive the decision," Dr. Akin said.

Yet that assessment was disputed by at least one senior agency official, who said residents were at "risk."

Scientists have not definitively determined the health effects from dioxin, a byproduct of various industrial processes. An agency draft study two years ago concluded that it was a "probable" cause of cancer. Tests have also shown that dioxin can cause developmental disorders in young animals.

Leaders of the citizens group here, jubilant over forcing the evironmental agency to accede to their wishes, are certain that it did so because of worries over health.

"When I got the news I was just overwhelmed," said Margaret Williams, who heads the group, Citizens Against Toxic Exposure.

But something besides health appears to be on the minds of officials who made the costly decision about what Dr. Akin described as "a very political site" — one that the agency singled out more than a year ago as a national test case for possible citizen relocations at other sites.

In a political climate newly charged with "environmental justice" considerations, health hardly entered the final equation at all, another senior said scientist, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

"It's a political motivation, and a response to political pressures, and it's an election year," the scientist said. "Essentially, E.P.A. has been told to move all the people out by the White House. They don't want this issue around." The scientist added that some upper-level supervisors were resentful. But he said, "They're doing the right thing for the wrong reasons."

Other agency officials vigorously denied the assertion. "Nothing can be further from the truth," said Loretta Ucelli, an agency spokeswoman. "There has been no involvement

NY TIMES 10/23/96

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s Response. But Judgment Is in Dispute.



Lee Celano for The New York Times

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Brian Johnson, a spokesman for the White House environmental office, said, "It was definitely an E.P.A. decision."

Senior officials at the agency insist that health concerns were uppermost in deciding on the relocation. "The contaminant there being dioxin, the residents there are at risk," said Tim Fields, a Deputy Assistant Administrator.

But how much risk is unclear. No comprehensive health survey has been undertaken, because the citizens group has refused to cooperate with the United States Public Health Service, fearing that it will conclude that nothing is amiss.

A health assessment commissioned by the Government last year from Florida scientists said about the dioxin found in some residents' yards: "The estimated daily dose for children ... is at least 10 times less than the level at which no adverse health effects have been observed in animals."

Bruce Tuovila, an author of the study and a scientist with the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, said in an interview: "The primary concern is whether there is any health issue for residents off the site. There doesn't appear to be, except in regards to dioxin. There really is not contamination off-site at levels of concern."

Still, Mr. Kaufman, the agency engineer, suggested that "common sense" justified the relocation. "Very few people are going to keel over and die because of a Superfund site," he said. "It's the long-term health risks that are the problem."

Agency officials acknowledge that the notion of "environmental justice" was a consideration, as it has been in the upper reaches of the Clinton Administration. This idea arises from studies indicating that minorities have been disproportionately affected by pollution.

In an executive order in 1994, President Clinton decreed that agencies pay heed to the notion of "environmental justice." The order required that minorities be given a voice in environmental regulation and that cleanup of minority neighborhoods affected by the worst toxic waste sites, or Superfund sites, like the one here, take priority. It is among about 1,300 such sites across the nation.

The citizens group here helped keep the notion of environmental justice on the front burner. The group was able to hire a scientist to watch over the agency's testing in the neighborhood near the plant.

Interpretations of the environmental agency's tests here have provoked controversy at other Superfund sites, said Dr. Akin, the agency scientist. Since the mid-1980's and Times Beach, where the Federal Government evacuated more than 2,000 residents because of dioxin fears, officials have used a standard of contamination in the soil of one part per billion to decide wheter people are in danger, the scientist said.

But at the site here, officials used a much looser standard, 0.2 parts per billion, a "rare exception," said Dr. Akin. He added: "A lot of decisions have been made around the country on the one part per billion. Someone could say, 'What are you going to say about all those other decisions?' "

Of the Escambia site, Dr. Akin said: "On our traditional number, you couldn't have justified doing anything down there." As to why the standard had been changed, he said: "The thinking was, it was just time to re-examine the driver. It certainly had something to do with the highly visible site."

The agency decided that here, 0.2 parts of dioxin per billion in the soil meant an additional 1 in 10,000 risk of developing cancer, its usual threshold for taking action. The agency found that the threshold had been exceeded at only 21 of the houses in the neighborhood.

Scientists fret about the policy effects of moving people away from a toxic site.

Mr. Fields, the Deputy Assistant Administrator, disputed the assertion that the 0.2 parts per billion was a rare exception. "The one part per billion is a level we used back in the mid-80's," he said. "Science has changed over time."

The residents here do not think in terms of excess cancer risks, or parts per billion. They are convinced that the cancer deaths they have seen in their own families, the stillborn babies, the stinging feeling in their eyes, are all directly attributable to the wood-treating plant.

"That stuff is in these houses, it's in these walls — it's terrible" said Ollie McWaine, who has lived near the plant for 38 of her 65 years.

Her husband, Jimmy, who is 60, agreed with the plans to move, saying, "The right idea is just to relocate the whole neighborhood."

No Agreement In G.M. Strike By Canadians

By KEITH BRADSHER

Negotiators trying to end an 18-day strike by Canadian auto workers against the General Motors Corporation made little progress over the weekend, but remained hopeful that a deal might be reached before a deadline of noon Monday.

Basil E. Hargrove, the president of the Canadian Automobile Workers union, said the two sides were close to an agreement on the critical issue of G.M.'s plans to sell two Canadian auto parts factories. But he also threatened to call a recess in the talks, possibly until Thursday, and let the shutdowns caused by the strike widen in the United States and Mexico if no compromise is reached on Monday.

D. Stewart Low, a G.M. spokesman, said that with work, the two sides could still reach the deadline. He said the two sides were "closing in on" settling the issue of the factory sales, as well as a separate dispute over G.M.'s plans to buy more parts from outside vendors.

In an interview this afternoon, Mr. Hargrove said for the first time that the union was willing to sign a new three-year labor contract and end the strike without first resolving several thousand small disputes pending at various factories over working conditions and other issues.

"The best we can do is try to do some of the more contentious ones," while leaving the rest of the disputes to settled over the next couple of months, he said.

Roughly 26,000 Canadian workers are on strike against G.M., prompting the company, the world's largest auto maker, to lay off temporarily an additional 7,500 workers at factories in the United States and Mexico that use or supply parts for the Canadian operations. While G.M. has stockpiled Canadian parts in preparation for a strike, those stockpiles are now running low.

Thomas Klipstine, a G.M. spokesman, said the company would be partly or entirely closing several more factories on Monday and idling several thousand more workers.

G.M. is trying to sell a car seat factory in Windsor, Ontario, and a large factory in Oshawa, Ontario, that makes bumpers, seat springs and other metal and plastic parts. The union wants G.M. to guarantee that the next owners will be barred from cutting wages or benefits for five or more years.

10/23/96

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