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DEC - 3 1990

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Greenpeace attacks dioxin studies

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When a 1949 explosion at Monsanto's Nitro complex sent clouds of dioxin through the plant and into the atmosphere, workers were overcome with the chemical's effects — skin lesions, nerve and kidney damage.

Monsanto later commissioned health studies on the workers' problems. The studies' findings — that dioxin cannot be linked directly to cancer in humans — have become cornerstones of chemical companies' defenses in lawsuits across the nation.

Now the international environmental group Greenpeace is attacking those studies as frauds.

In a report released today to the Environmental Protection Agency, Greenpeace researchers blast the study's methods, analysis and findings.

The organization is asking the EPA, which uses the study as a basis for its own dioxin policies, to review its stand on the man-made chemical that causes cancer in rats.

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has come to light which indicates a clear pattern of manipulation and misconduct in the studies."

Joe Thornton,
Greenpeace researcher

has come to light which indicates "a clear pattern of manipulation and misconduct in the studies," Greenpeace research analyst Joe Thornton writes in his study, titled "Science for Sale."

Thornton charges in his 43-page critique that an examination of the original report showed "a pattern of deliberate manipulation of data and study methods in order to obtain the predetermined result that dioxin had no negative effects on worker health."

Monsanto officials denounced the report.

"That critique reflects their total ig-

norance of epidemiology," said corporate spokesman Dan Bishop. "That study has stood for years. It was peer-reviewed by other scientists before it was published."

Greenpeace lists several problems with the Monsanto-funded studies that were published in the early 1980s:

"A The studies compared workers who were exposed to dioxin during the explosion with other workers in the plant who were presumed to have avoided the chemical. Both groups, Thornton says, had already been exposed to high levels of dioxin simply by working at the plant,

▲ Using other groups of the same people, original researchers separated workers by type of exposure. That made each group smaller and the results less reliable.

▲ Researchers relied on only the appearance of chloracne — a severe skin disease — as the criteria for dioxin exposure in some cases. That move put dioxin-exposed workers without the disease into the control group, contaminating results.

▲ In parts of the studies, workers were eliminated from certain groups, researchers failed to follow stated procedures and ill workers without chloracne were ignored.

"As a result of those manipulations, the data and conclusions of the three Monsanto studies are essentially meaningless," the critique said.

"However, it is noteworthy that, after at least partial correction of the most glaring manipulations of this flawed information, the data indicate substantially elevated rates of many health effects among dioxin-exposed workers."

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Greenpeace vs. studies

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Greenpeace is calling on the EPA to investigate the studies; bar federal officials from relying on the studies and establish a national dioxin elimination program.

Bishop, with Monsanto, says Greenpeace's claims are bunk.

"This review by Greenpeace is nothing more than a rehash of issues brought up in other trials," he said. "These were highly qualified scientists, and their work has never been challenged by competent scientists."

Greenpeace is using the issue in its fund-raising effort, he said. The group has not brought up any points that have not already been challenged in court and defeated.

Bishop declined to go over Greenpeace's charges point by point, but said other studies, including one by the workers' union, came up with the same findings.

"We stand by the studies," he said. "And we're outraged."

The studies played a central role in a mid-1980s Charleston court case brought by workers who had been exposed to dioxin during the explosion and in a line that produced herbicide.

While the lawyers on each side of the case differ on Greenpeace's

claims, they do agree that any tampering with the original studies would have profound effects on future litigation.

"That study is a very powerful defense for industry in case after case," said attorney Stuart Calwell, who brought the suit against Monsanto for the dioxin-exposed workers. "I've always felt that study was flawed."

Calwell cited many of the same problems Greenpeace listed. He helped the organization get Monsanto records by filing briefs with the courts.

"What they did in the original study was like going into a cancer ward, dividing it in half, and then saying that there was no difference between the two halves," Calwell said.

Charles Love, who argued for Monsanto in the case, said the Monsanto studies are important, but others have corroborated its findings as well.

"It's preposterous to suggest that someone would manipulate the study," Love said. "In the trial, epidemiologists from all over the country were there and I never heard one say anything about the types of problems Greenpeace is raising."