

Op-Ed Page

Penta, Vulcan incinerator threaten Wichita's environment

By Helen Perivier

Vulcan Materials Co. is celebrating 30 years of operations in Wichita. In an Oct. 21 letter to the Eagle-Beacon, Vulcan proudly listed its accomplishments as employer for the community and producer of chemical products commonly used in modern society.

Vulcan failed to mention the serious environmental problems inherent to its industry. There was no discussion of how Vulcan will prevent public exposure to the toxic chemicals now generated at its Wichita facility.

Certainly, it is not news to Wichita that Vulcan has severely contaminated its immediate area with PCBs and hexachlorobenzene, two toxics known to cause cancer and other diseases. Drinking water supplies of neighbors have been so badly contaminated by Vulcan's escaping chemicals that the company has had to supply alternate water sources.

While these may be classified as "local problems," no one can deny that toxic chemical exposure has become a national — and global — issue.

Chlorinated hydrocarbons, such as those used and produced by Vulcan, are among the most potent and persistent poisons the world faces today. In many cases the public is finding that the risks of these toxic chemicals far outweigh their benefits.

Chlorinated hydrocarbons that already have been banned are DDT, PCBs and 2, 4, 5-T (a component of the herbicide Agent Orange). Each of these chemicals, like Vulcan's pentachlorophenol, are chlorinated hydrocarbons whose strong chlorine bonds resist the natural process of biodegradation. Accumulating through the food chain, these toxins threaten long-term damage for future generations.

VULCAN IS THE LAST remaining U.S. producer of the controversial wood preservative, pentachlorophenol, commonly known as "penta." Penta can be found everywhere — on telephone poles, picnic ta-

Editor's Note: Vulcan Chemical's proposal to use an incinerator to burn pentachlorophenol, a wood preservative, is a major issue in Wichita. This article by Helen Perivier, a representative of Greenpeace, an environmental organization, will be followed Tuesday by an article from James M. Boyd, Vulcan plant manager.

bles, residential decks, bridges and railroad ties. Public exposure is so widespread that the EPA has determined penta can also be found in the urine of 86 percent of all Americans in the continental United States.

Technical grade penta contains numerous chemicals, including extremely toxic dioxins and hexachlorobenzene. Exposure to technical penta causes health problems that range from fatigue, skin disorders, and headaches to cancer, birth defects, miscarriages, liver damage and weakening of the immune system. Blood diseases such as aplastic anemia and leukemia are linked to its use. EPA also has found that penta concentrates in sperm cells, measurably lowering sperm counts.

A case history of damages caused by penta could fill a book: illnesses among families living in penta-treated log homes; deaths caused by spills and occupational exposure; babies who died after sleeping on sheets disinfected with penta; and animal deaths caused by bedding on penta-contaminated sawdust.

This penta case history would devote a whole chapter to Oroville, Calif., site of the Koppers Wood Treating Co. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry is investigating the effects drinking penta-contaminated water has had on Oroville's people. Chronic illnesses prevail among the community's residents, along with deformities in their pets and livestock. When 10,000 gallons of penta caught fire and burned at Koppers last spring, the community's health problems were further aggravated by the diox-

ins that were created by the burning penta.

Nor would the history omit the 1983 penta spill that is linked to the sudden deaths of eight gray whales in Washington state and British Columbia. Or the great blue heron colony in British Columbia, where not one of the colony's more than 200 eggs hatched last spring. The Canadian Wildlife Service has linked the failed births to exposure to wood-preserving chlorophenols, such as penta.

In 1986, the EPA banned most non-wood uses of the chemical, and outlawed its over-the-counter sales. Now facing costly cleanups at wood treatment plants across the country, the EPA plans tighter regulations for the disposal of penta-contaminated wood treating wastes.

Consequently, fewer wood treating plants are willing to use penta. The use of penta for wood treating declined at a rate of 6 percent a year between 1978 and 1984. Of the 28 new wood preserving plants that came on stream in 1985, not one opted to treat with penta.

CONTINUING TO PROMOTE and produce penta is evidently in Vulcan's economic interest. To protect its market, the company is proposing to build a hazardous waste incinerator to burn its customers' penta wastes.

Vulcan also would burn its own penta production waste. Currently no land disposal site or incinerator is licensed to handle this dioxin-contaminated acutely hazardous waste.

Incineration is being pushed as a "quick fix" for the nation's toxic waste dilemma. Responding to dwindling waste disposal options, waste generators, incinerator operators and many EPA officials assure us of the complete safety of hazardous waste burners. Critics, including concerned community members, often are branded as ignorant or unreasonable.

Yet in 1985 the EPA's own Science Advisory Board labeled hazardous waste burners as "stationary point sources which emit pollutants into the air, land, and

water media." On the EPA's incinerator program, the board warned that "the Agency continues to experience difficulties both in assessing and managing hazardous waste incineration programs."

Vulcan's proposed incinerator would expose Wichita's citizens both to penta that is not destroyed and to new toxics produced by the incineration process itself — so-called products of incomplete combustion (PICs). According to EPA reports, these PICs may "pose a significant risk to the public." These toxic chemicals are released in the incinerator ash and in the effluents of pollution control devices.

WHAT WILL THE NEXT 30 years of Vulcan's operations in Wichita bring? Penta moves closer and closer to being banned in this century. Rather than acknowledging that reality, Vulcan proposes to construct an incinerator that promises long-range harm in exchange for the short-term financial gains of the next five, maybe 10 years.

After that point, Vulcan will have to keep its new \$8 million commercial incinerator profitable by accepting unknown poisons from unknown customers, and meanwhile place Wichita on the map as the hazardous waste disposal capital of the Midwest.

The manufacturers of DDT and 2, 4, 5-T prolonged the use of these products long after serious health effects proved these products too poisonous for use. Those who stood to gain economically were willing to risk the lives of thousands of people for that extra five or 10 years of profit. Will Vulcan continue that tradition?

The Plains Keepers, a Kansas grassroots environmental group, has organized to protect the Great Plains from turning into a toxic dumpsite. Calling for a halt of both Vulcan's penta production and proposal to operate a commercial hazardous waste incinerator in Wichita, the Plains Keepers' first general meeting is Tuesday at the Rex Elementary School in Haysville. Anyone with concerns about Vulcan's proposal should attend this gathering.