

Vinyl chloride discharge would be tiny, firm says

By HAROLD SCARLETT
Post Environment Writer

The Diamond Shamrock Corp. told a public hearing Monday that vinyl chloride emissions from its new plant would be only about one-seventh of the amount permissible under proposed federal air pollution regulations.

But Dr. David Marrack, a Houston physician and pathologist, argued that any emissions of the cancer-linked gas may be hazardous to public health.

The conflicting positions unfolded at a Texas Air Control Board hearing on whether to permit construction of the big new vinyl chloride (VC) manufacturing plant.

Costing more than \$100 million, the plant southeast of the San Jacinto Battleground would produce up to 1 billion pounds of VC annually, or about 12 per cent of total U.S. production.

A Diamond Shamrock engineer, William C. Hutton, said pending Environmental Protection Agency regulations would allow the plant to emit 156 tons of VC a year.

But the highly controlled plant, Hutton said, will actually discharge 21 tons of the gas, or only about 14 per cent of the proposed EPA limit.

Marrack, however, said it is also the EPA's position that without strong evidence to the contrary, it cannot be assumed that VC emissions of any level are totally safe.

The British-born physician further argued that plant upsets and accidents could unleash large slugs of VC gas.

He said another VC plant in the Houston area had emitted about 20,000 pounds of the gas into the atmosphere in an upset on July 16 — the originally scheduled date of the Diamond Shamrock hearing.

Air board officials later confirmed the Union Carbide Corp. plant in Texas City had reported the forced release of 23,000 pounds of VC on that day. The company blamed a power failure for the incident.

Hutton said the Diamond Shamrock plant would have standby power sources and other safety features that would make plant upsets a "very remote" possibility.

Vinyl chloride, after compounding into polyvinyl chloride (PVC), is the basic material of plastic products ranging from water pipes to phonograph records.

The Diamond Shamrock plant is the latest in a series of new VC or PVC plants built or planned in the Houston area since the discovery early in 1974 that VC gas was causing angiosarcoma, a rare liver cancer, in long-time plant workers.

The chemical has since been linked to other types of cancer and is under study as a possible cause of birth defects.

Evidence in the hearing, which continued into Monday night, will resume at 9 a.m. Tuesday. The hearing is being held in the Deer Park Community Center at 610 East San Augustine.

In the day's touchiest legal ruling, acting hearing examiner John Turney admitted a deposition taken by Diamond Shamrock from one out-of-state medical expert, but ruled out the statement of a second expert.