

Producers vow to fight OSHA proposal; SPI urges hearing of industry viewpoint

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NEW YORK—The response of the plastics industry to the Department of Labor's proposed "no detectable level" vinyl chloride standard is one of dismay.

Calling the standard "excessively and unrealistically restrictive," the Society of the

Plastics Industry (SPI) is urging the Department to hold hearings to allow industry to present plans both to insure worker safety and to continue operating. The first flush of comments from industry makes such hearings appear inevitable.

The initial reaction of many producers has been

heated, with some seeing the proposed standard as a threat to the future of PVC. "We would be unable to operate under this level, and we doubt anyone else could," says a spokesman for Good-year Tire & Rubber Co. Whatever the initial reaction, however, the producers' concern is twofold: technological compliance and economic compliance.

"No detectable level" is the standard's requirement, but as one industrial lab man points out: "It depends on how the level is being measured. 'No detectable level' is not necessarily zero." And indeed, the Department of Labor notes that levels up to 1½ parts per million will be permitted. (See related story, p. 1.)

"The technology for measuring these levels is available," says Dr. Donald Lassiter of the Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). "Several methods can be used to obtain an accurate sampling. Companies can use any one they choose and even send samples out for analysis. We're not trying to break anyone by forcing him to buy expensive equipment."

Even so, say industry spokesmen, the age of a plant can be a major factor in compliance. The newer plants, which have better ventilation, will have less trouble complying than older plants that may need extensive—and expensive—renovations.

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"I don't think any plant can comply," says Harry Connors, general manager of Diamond Shamrock Chemical Co.'s Plastics Div. "We can build new plants, but how long will that take? The proposed standard is unnecessary, anyway. The data just doesn't indicate toxicity at low levels. Besides being expensive, compliance could also pose new problems. Even if we could get our workers to wear respirators and protective clothing, they might make them clumsy and cause accidents."

The expenses involved in compliance worry everyone, partly because of the increased manufacturing costs, partly because passing these costs along to the customer may result in lost business. "A standard this strict would definitely raise the price of PVC," says Wallace Howells, national sales manager, Polymer Group, Ruco Div., Hooker Chemical Co. "With current supply problems, we're already getting close to the price of glass. It's a basic problem of protecting your livelihood."

The costs of compliance may separate those who are committed to sticking with PVC from those who are not, says Al Keller, market manager, M&T Chemicals Co., a major supplier of stabilizers. "The big resin producers are emotional right now," he tells Food & Drug Packaging, "but compliance is not impossible. They can do it if they have to. It's a matter of spending money and taking precautions. Vinyl chloride is not too big a business to shut down over an OSHA rule."

Mr. Keller adds, as do many others, that the immediate result may be a temporary capacity problem as producers either begin compliance or drop out of the market. This shortage could send customers scurrying to manufacturers of alternative materials—who admit they have major shortage problems themselves.

"We've had an unusual number of inquiries," says Don Hall, product manager for Vistron Corp.'s Barex high-barrier resin. "Many companies are concerned about PVC and rightfully so. Other materials will have to take up the slack if the PVC producers start losing business, but everyone has a supply problem."

Jim Alberts, vice president, marketing, Rexene Polymers says inquiries about polypropylene have also been heavy. "It's a question of production and availability," he says. "There's just no volume."

The plastics industry, meanwhile, is taking steps of its own. An economic impact survey is now being prepared for SPI by the Arthur D. Little, Inc. consulting firm and is expected to be completed in mid-July. The PVC producers have also formed an ad hoc committee to represent them, and the Department of Labor says that the storm of protest over the proposed standard has been so fast and furious that there is "no way" hearings this summer can be avoided. The producers are said to be hoping to obtain a compromise level of 20 to 30 parts per million.

The outcome now remains to be seen, but some producers expect the excitement will die down. "It's blown way out of proportion," says one. "We found one part per million in the air 20 miles from our plant. The levels of lethal hydrocarbons and lead were much higher. Where's the logic?"

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