

Unwelcome Incinerator

Fight Over PCBs Shows How Hard It Is To Destroy Chemicals and Satisfy People

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LOGAN TOWNSHIP, N.J.—The smiling executive plunges two fingers into a quart jar of clear liquid; the viscous substance consists of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, the only toxic chemicals whose manufacture is specifically outlawed by Congress.

"You've got a lot worse stuff than this in your medicine cabinet," he asserts.

Maybe. But just try telling that to residents of this surprisingly rural community in the industrialized Delaware River Valley. Although many of them work in nearby chemical plants, the townspeople are hoping mud at the prospect that thousands of pounds of PCBs will be trucked into a plant operated here by Hollins Environmental Services Inc., a chemical-waste disposal company.

The modernistic facility, which is surrounded by acres of tomato and pepper fields, has been here for about a decade. Now, along with another Rollins plant in Deer Park, Texas, and a disposal plant in El Dorado, Ark., it has angled to become one of the first federally sanctioned sites for incinerating PCBs. None has yet been approved.

The townspeople's angry reaction will undoubtedly be repeated in other communities as the nation wrestles with the problem of finding places to destroy toxic wastes. "They're using us as guinea pigs," says Mary More, the young deputy township clerk, who worries that the chemicals could harm her two children.

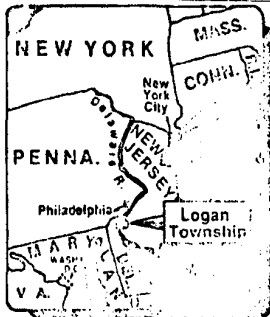
"Everybody feels they've had it shoved down their craw," says Glen Hughes, a heavy-equipment operator. Rosemary Wilson, the owner of a country store, says she'll "put the place up for sale" if the PCB burning begins.

Pollution Fears

The opponents are a collection of local people, including housewives, laborers, some professional people and local officials. They say, among other things, that PCB burning would pollute nearby Racoon Creek, poison underground water supplies and drastically depress local land values. And they recall a 1967 explosion at the plant that killed six workers.

The township's indignation is fueled by vehement distrust of Rollins, which is a subsidiary of HFC Corp. and was one of the first companies to make a legitimate business of destroying toxic chemicals. At a hearing last week, residents told officials of the Environmental Protection Agency that the company's operations here have been characterized by leaking drums, noxious odors and sloppy procedures.

The company denies all such charges. It says that it does and will do an effective job safely. But EPA officials at the hearing said they were preparing a federal suit aimed at halting any abuses.



National environmental groups aren't directly involved in the dispute, more than most people they realize the need to dispose of toxic chemicals somewhere. However, some of the representatives are trying to make sure that things are done as safely as possible at Logan Township.

Scientists say tests have proved that PCBs can be safely and completely destroyed by incineration. Moreover, officials of the Environmental Protection Agency have vowed they won't let the burning begin until they're absolutely satisfied that people will be protected.

An EPA expert, James Marshall, director of external programs for the agency's New York-New Jersey office, says, "In general, PCBs can be incinerated without any public health risk" because the temperature is high enough to completely transform the PCBs into harmless carbon dioxide and water. If some PCBs did escape, he says, the smokestack is constructed in such a way as to disperse them high enough and far enough to minimize health risks.

As for any danger before incineration, he says, there are "very clear requirements" spelled out to safeguard the public during transport, handling and storage.

Be that as it may, says Mayor John Wright, who works in a Du Pont chemical plant, "no town in its right mind is going to let these kinds of things come in." Clearly, the people here won't be happy until the Rollins plant is forced out of existence. "It's morally not right," Kenneth A. DiMuzio, a lawyer, said at the hearing.

All of which strikes some observers as distressingly ironic. For years, critics have castigated PCBs, pointing to specific cases of the chemicals' burning up in the Hudson River, North Carolina ditches and even mother's milk. Now that the federal government has set rigid rules for burning the stuff so thoroughly that 99.9% of what is incinerated is supposed to be destroyed, some people see danger in that, too. A similar battle is raging in El Dorado.

The Midnight Dumper

"Everybody wants it picked up, nobody wants it put down," says Eckhardt C. Beck, the EPA's regional administrator for New York and New Jersey.

That could be disastrous if society doesn't give industries a place to dispose of toxic waste, Mr. Beck asks, "what are they going to do?" He answers his own question succinctly: "give it to the midnight dumper" who illegally gets rid of toxic wastes late at night by the side of the road or in vacant lots.

Mr. Beck's blunt conclusion carries ominous implications, extending well beyond the 440 million pounds of PCB wastes said to be strewn about the environment and the 750 million pounds of PCBs still in use. The EPA says it may cost \$50 billion to clean up past years' midnight dumping of toxic chemicals. Further, it is calculated that each year enough new hazardous waste is generated—and, for the most part, improperly discarded—to fill every street and alley in Manhattan to knee level.

PCBs play an important role in this chemical horror story. Congress specifically banned their manufacture in the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976, because they are suspected of causing cancer and birth defects by getting into the air and the food supply. PCBs were the only substance so singled out.

Not Made Since 1977

Primarily used as insulators in electrical equipment, PCBs haven't been made since 1977. (There are adequate substitutes.) Since the 750 million pounds still in use will be phased out over the next 40 years, PCBs will increasingly exist solely as garbage—dangerous garbage. The planned incineration method appears to be the only way to effectively get rid of it. "It's a spooky waste," acknowledges Jack Larcott, the Rollins executive who immersed his fingers in the PCB jar.

Rollins's president, William B. Philpott, agrees. "You're never going to get people to accept this," he says in a moment of near-despair. "It's just impossible." Nevertheless, the company already spent more than \$500,000 preparing its plant here for the arrival of the PCBs.

The local opposition couldn't care less. "The ovens of Germany have not been destroyed, only relocated," read a sign placed in front of the Rollins plant gate. Another of the townspeople's messages paraphrased the popular song "You Light Up My Life." It said, "You Sink Up My Life."

Sometimes this emotion simply spills out of control. As a public hearing last spring, a woman began jumping about wildly, hurling insults at Rollins officials. "If she'd had a gun," Mr. Philpott says, "she would have shot us."

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Tours Don't Help

Even company-sponsored tours of the plant don't exactly dispel fears. Behind its high fences are discharge lagoons bubbling like witches' cauldrons, scores of drums labeled with skull and crossbones, and a belching 300-foot smokestack. To boot, the operation regularly emits a "sickening smell," says Esther Slusarski, a leading opponent.

Rollins says it has already proved it can do a professional job of disposing of more than 10,000 different kinds of hazardous chemicals: in Logan Township, Deer Park and Baton Rouge, La. It even burned PCBs before the more stringent federal rules took effect. The company was instrumental in helping the EPA determine the tougher standards.

At least one townspeople is convinced: "It's better to have them burned under control than dumped somewhere," says Grace Filemyr, who operates a vegetable stand across the road from the plant. "A lot of people are making statements not based on fact," she says. "They go off the deep end."

Explosion Remembered

The debate is made considerably nastier by the memory of the fatal explosion 20 months ago that sent black smoke billowing thousands of feet in the air. Remembering that, Mayor Wright says: "These people aren't to be trusted in any way, shape or form."

Rollins, which contends that the accident was precipitated by outside contractors, not by its own employees, says the catastrophe actually proved the plant's safety. "The explosion was an absolutely worst-case situation," yet tests by outside experts showed that toxic contamination "was all contained" on the plant grounds, Rollins's Mr. Lurcott says.

PCBs aren't explosive and played no part in causing the accident, the company says. But one of 14 tanks involved did have material containing PCBs in it, and one reason the accident caused alarm was the fear that PCBs might have escaped into the atmosphere.

The whole controversy could be resolved within the next few months; the EPA hopes to conduct a test-burn, largely to measure the effectiveness of Rollins's monitoring equipment. Several times, small quantities of PCBs are to be incinerated at 2,700 degrees Fahrenheit. But Mayor Wright hints that the townspeople may resort to violence to halt the test-burn. "We're trying to stop it completely," he says.

EPA officials say that the test-burn isn't specifically required by law and that they are demanding it principally as an extra guarantee of safety. They promise that it will be closely scrutinized. "The place will be crawling with Feds," an agency spokesman says.

In the end, the dispute comes down to a question of balancing the national need to safely dispose of toxic chemicals with understandable local wishes to see it done elsewhere.

"In this neck of the woods, the general view is 'Let's do it all in Nevada,'" Rollins's Mr. Lurcott says. He doubts that the people in Nevada would agree.

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