

EPA denies a request for a Michigan dioxin study

The Environmental Protection Agency has denied the petition by a Michigan environmental group to conduct extensive studies of possible dioxin pollution in that state. The petition sought studies of possible air, water and soil pollution that the group contends were caused by dioxins from a Dow Chemical plant in Midland, Mich. EPA, in denying the petition, said that it is already conducting such studies in conjunction with Michigan's environmental agency. The agency says it is difficult to assess the potential harm of airborne dioxins because there is "much less information available on the presence of these types of pollutants." Dioxin is one of 37 air pollutants that is a candidate for listing as a hazardous air pollutant by EPA under the Clean Air Act.

The slim rewards of asbestos litigation

Those people who have filed lawsuits claiming disease or death from asbestos exposure have received only 37¢ for every dollar spent by all parties in such litigation, according to a study by the Rand Corp.'s Institute for Civil Justice. In a review of 24,000 suits, James S. Kakalik, the study's principal author, and other researchers found that over \$1 billion has been spent by plaintiffs and corporate defendants in litigation and compensation. Defendants have paid out an average of about \$60,000 per claim in compensation and another \$35,000 in litigation expenses. Legal expenses incurred by the plaintiffs averaged \$25,000, reducing that \$60,000 compensation figure to an average \$35,000.

A natural gas decontrol bill goes to the Senate

In an 11-9 vote last week, the Senate Energy Committee finally sent to the Senate floor a bill to decontrol natural gas prices. But the measure was forwarded "without recommendation" and still faces an uncertain future. Floor action is not expected for weeks. The bill would end all price controls on gas by 1987 but would allow pipelines and utilities to reduce the amount of high-priced gas supplies they would be obligated to pay for under existing contracts. Representatives from gas-consuming states claim the bill would lead to a \$40 billion windfall for gas producers, and they vow to kill the proposal. Meanwhile, the House fossil fuels subcommittee, long deadlocked on decontrol, says it will try to vote out a bill by Aug. 8.

A prediction for higher oil prices

Oil will rise rapidly in price and lose some of its importance as an energy source by the mid-1990s, according to a study by the World Bank. In its 1983

World Development Report, the bank projects that by 1995 oil prices will rise 20% in real terms over peak 1981 prices and account for only 35% of world energy use, compared with 45% in 1980. In contrast, electricity and coal will become more important sources of energy as they become more competitive in price. Nonetheless, the report concludes, OPEC will remain a powerful force in world energy markets because developed nations are doing little to reduce their reliance on petroleum imports. Oil prices will rebound, bank economists believe, as world economies recover and energy demand expands "more quickly than the availability of cheap, incremental supplies."

Chances drop for a renewal of PIK

Although Payment-in-Kind and other Agriculture Dept. programs have so far done little to reduce the nation's surplus of wheat, the department is likely to offer farmers even less incentive to idle cropland in 1984. The escalating costs of PIK and other programs are generating intense pressure for Agriculture Secretary John R. Block to scale back benefits to farmers, regardless of the results. In its *Mid-Session Economic Review*, the Administration revealed that the costs of farm supports are now likely to be significantly higher than the \$23 billion first estimated for fiscal 1983 and the \$14 billion estimated for the coming fiscal year. Before the report was released, the department had been considering a package of incentives, including another PIK program, that would have attempted to take some 23-26 million acres of wheat land out of production. Such a reduction, of course, would have further damaged fertilizer and pesticide sales.

A report cites ways to increase production of food

In order to adequately feed the world's population in the year 2015, science will have to come up with more cost-effective agricultural chemicals and make significant advances in plant and animal genetic engineering. That's the conclusion of a report issued by the second Chemical Research Applied World Needs conference in Washington. According to the report, the best opportunity to meet the food needs of the earth's population of eight billion will come from improving the productivity of farm land in developing countries, where land often goes unplanted because of low fertility, high erosion, salinity, acidity, and toxicity. These problems can be solved by using less expensive controlled-release fertilizers and by developing varieties of plants and animals that are more resistant to pests and disease, the conference report says.