

Safety agency wants zero level

Industry pessimistic on vinyl-chloride proposal

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Chemical industry officials say it would be impossible to comply with a proposed new federal regulation that would ban the exposure of workers to any detectable level of vinyl chloride, a suspected cancer-producing gas.

The proposed regulation, disclosed yesterday in Washington by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the U.S. Labor Department, is scheduled to be implemented as soon as July, according to an OSHA spokesman.

News of the OSHA decision to press for the ban, previously recommended by several agencies of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, has thrown the industry into turmoil because vinyl chloride is a basic raw material of much of the plastics industry.

Industry officials claim that the technology does not exist that would permit exposure levels to be reduced to less than detectable levels in a manufacturing situation. They say that providing major ad-

ditional safeguards would also be impossible because of the huge expense involved.

Adoption of the OSHA recommendation "would blow the industry out of the ball park. It's that simple," said a spokesman for the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., a major competitor in the industry. "It will be impossible to comply," he said.

Other chemical industry officials have said the same thing in interviews over the past month, but they have declined to make their comments publicly.

Concern about the dangers of vinyl chloride has escalated sharply since the first of the year, when the B. F. Goodrich Co. admitted that several workers at its Bells Lane plant in Louisville died of angiosarcoma, a rare cancer of the liver. Previously, concern about the chemical was primarily limited to a variety of reports in trade and medical journals, reports that the industry has repeatedly said have not been conclusive.

Since then 14 confirmed angiosarcoma cases among chemical workers have been reported, half of them at the Louisville

Goodrich plant. At least one of the deaths occurred as early as 1964. Two of the seven Goodrich workers are still alive and are being treated for the disease.

The OSHA recommendation that "no detectable level" of the gas be permitted in work places would mean the industry would have to adopt a wide-ranging list of stringent safety rules to both reduce the existing exposure levels and to monitor the working levels and health conditions of their employees.

"No detectable level" of vinyl chloride is generally considered to be a level of less than one part of the gas per million parts of air. According to industry officials, developing the necessary equipment to approach that level and to provide continuous monitoring of so minute a quantity could take more money than the industry can provide. They say the traditional selling point of most plastics has been their generally low cost, and that customers and consumers would have to bear the brunt of any major new safety expenditures.

Currently, the industry is working

under a recently adopted "emergency" standard that reduced the maximum allowable exposure limit from 500 parts of the gas per million parts of air to 50 parts.

Industry officials privately admit that even when their plants are in compliance with the 50 parts-per-million standard, levels frequently exceed that level during "surges," or leaks, within their chemical production systems.

The levels are especially hard to control at older plants, which are less efficient and more susceptible to equipment failures, the industry people report. Some 6,500 workers are employed in the vinyl and polyvinyl-chloride industry at 51 plants.

Polyvinyl chloride, a white powder made from vinyl chloride gas, is a basic building block of many plastics used in such diverse products as phonograph records and floor tiles.

The government recently acted under

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mounting pressures to ban vinyl chloride as a propellant in aerosol sprays, many of which are used by consumers in such products as hair sprays and insecticides.

Today, a spokesman for Goodrich said its exposure level at the Bells Lane plant is currently averaging between 15 and 18 parts per million parts of air.

However, he conceded there may be higher concentrations from time to time because of equipment failures. Workers in the plant have reported that they have had to wear respirators, a relatively new safety precaution adopted by Goodrich whenever the exposure levels rise above 50 parts per million.

The Goodyear spokesman said he did not know what the company's response would be to the OSHA proposal disclosed yesterday, because the firm has not seen the OSHA recommendation. He also said he could not speculate whether the firm could comply with a standard of "no detectable level."

Spokesmen for other firms, however, were less reserved in their reactions.

Dr. T. R. Torkelson of the Dow Chemical Co., head of an investigative group working on the vinyl-chloride problem for the Manufacturing Chemists Association, a trade group, said it would be "very, very difficult" to comply with the OSHA recommendation, especially at older chemical plants.

While he stressed that he is a biologist and not a production expert, he said it is his understanding that "in time" a non-detectable level could be reached, "but whether it could be done on an economically justified basis is another question."

A spokesman for another firm, who asked not to be identified, said first that a nondetectable level is "unattainable," adding "or if it is, nobody could afford to buy what we're making."

Vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride are both large-volume, generally low-cost products, despite recent wholesale price increases. Various grades of polyvinyl

chloride recently have been selling for 18 to 20 cents a pound.

Certain to be a key point of dispute when the OSHA recommendation comes up for an expected public hearing in the latter half of June is a controversial provision in a report that the exhaust air from the chemical plants "shall not be discharged . . . unless decontaminated."

The report, prepared by the U.S. Public Health Service, the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health also recommended that there be no detectable levels of exposure and said all exhaust be decontaminated whether exhausted inside or outside the chemical plants.

No effective method, officials say

This point becomes critical because most of the plants that in recent months have sharply cut their concentrations of vinyl chloride have done so by exhausting the air out of the plant and, according to industry officials, there currently is no effective, economically feasible method of decontaminating that much air.

One industry expert claimed that a rough calculation showed that burning off the vinyl chloride residue from the exhaust air at all the plants in the country would take more natural gas to fuel the process than exists in the nation.

A second method, carbon-scrubbing, or passing the air through charcoal, has not been found fully effective as yet, according to the industry spokesman.

At the present, there are no companies known to be decontaminating the air that passes from the vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride plants, they said.

A Goodrich spokesman has declined to say what the levels of exposure have been outside the plant. The plant in recent months has greatly improved its ventilation system, sucking the air out of the plant continuously from the areas where high concentrations of vinyl chloride are apt to build up.

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