

MEMORANDUM, TUESDAY, JANUARY 23, 1991

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Browning / David L. Feltre

Company's Dioxin Studies Under Fire

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STAFF WRITER

A chemical company's studies showing that workers have not been seriously harmed by exposure to dioxin have come under fire by Greenpeace and now scrutiny by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA has launched a criminal investigation of whether the dioxin studies by Monsanto Corp., a St. Louis-based chemical company, are fraudulent, according to an internal EPA memo. And the environmental organization Greenpeace has petitioned the EPA to reassess the validity of the studies and the agency's regulation of dioxin, which Greenpeace alleges has been adversely influenced by the Monsanto research.

The studies by Monsanto of workers at its Nitro, W. Va., plant have been relied on by the federal government to show that dioxin exposure has not been harmful to humans and does not require more stringent regulation or classification as a significant human carcinogen. The government and chemical companies have used the studies to discredit claims by Vietnam veterans that their exposure to the dioxin-contaminated herbicide Agent Orange has damaged their health.

A study published in a medical journal last week showed that chemical workers exposed to 500 times the normal amount of dioxin for at least a year are nearly 50 percent more likely to develop some kinds of cancer. The study, carried out by the National Insti-

tute for Occupational Safety and Health, suggested that lesser exposure is not dangerous.

A Monsanto spokesman in St. Louis said earlier this month the company welcomes the EPA investigation and called Greenpeace's allegation that the studies are flawed "a bald-faced lie" that the environmental group is using as part of its fund-raising drive.

Don R. Bishop, Monsanto's director of corporate communications, said the company thinks the EPA investigation is "the only way to put the matter to rest." He added in a press release that, "The company stands by its findings, welcomes any legitimate scientific audit and is absolutely certain that its studies will continue to withstand legitimate scientific scrutiny."

In addition, Bishop said that before news of the EPA investigation first surfaced late last year, Monsanto had independently requested an EPA audit of its studies "to settle this matter for once and for all."

A spokesman for the EPA in Washington, D.C., Dwayne Winters, said earlier this month that he cannot confirm or deny that a criminal investigation is under way, but said the agency is studying the issues raised by Greenpeace's Nov. 29 petition. Winters said the agency will respond to the petition by Feb. 28.

According to a memo from EPA chemist Dr. Cate Jenkins to the EPA's Office of Criminal Investigations in Denver, one of the key flaws in the Monsanto studies was the inclusion of exposed workers in the unexposed group and vice versa. Consequently, the incidence of cancer and other illnesses in the exposed

group would have been diluted by the inclusion of unexposed workers, Jenkins explained.

This issue was raised in a successful federal suit against Monsanto by workers at one of its plants in East St. Louis, Ill. Monsanto has appealed that verdict.

Greenpeace raised the same question in the critique of the Monsanto studies, which it appended to its petition. The critique was based on court documents and published research. "The Greenpeace analysis of several of the studies show that dozens of workers with cancer and heart disease, who were known to be exposed to dioxin, were inappropriately shifted into unexposed 'control' groups or excluded from the studies altogether," Greenpeace said in November.

Joe Thornton, author of the Greenpeace critique, said in a telephone interview this month: "We're relying on scientists who are paid and hired by the corporations who are producing these chemicals to formulate policies and these regulations . . . We really need to rethink our reliance on corporate-paid experts."

The Greenpeace petition also asks that the EPA not rely on the studies as part of its regulatory efforts or assessments of carcinogenic risk and that the agency establish a national dioxin-elimination program to control the release of dioxin into the environment. Under Section 31 of the Toxic Substances Control Act, the EPA has until Feb. 28 to answer the petition. "I can tell you that we take any Section 31 request rather seriously," Winters said. If the petition is denied, the petitioner can go to federal court for a hearing.

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FYI from a L.I. Newspaper

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