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Chemist says EPA withheld dioxin evidence

An Environmental Protection Agency chemist has charged that agency officials suppressed evidence of dioxin and other poisons at wood-treatment waste sites, affecting drinking-water supplies in the Oroville area and three other rural communities.

The EPA also softened its regulation of wood preservers in response to industry lobbying and political pressure from several congress members, including then-Senator and now Vice President Dan Quayle, according to Cate Jenkins, a chemist at the agency's headquarters who helped draft the new industry rules.

EPA officials in Washington and San Francisco could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Elsewhere in her report to Congress, Jenkins charged that agency officials suppressed evidence of dioxin contamination in sites near drinking water supplies for the communities of Sweetwater, Tenn.; Joplin, Mo.; and DeQueen, Ark.

UCSF to Curb Hospital Toxics Pollution-Control Devices

By Elliot Diring
Chronicle Staff Writer

Officials at the University of California at San Francisco said yesterday they will voluntarily curb toxic releases from hospital sterilizers at the medical center even though they believe the gases pose no major health risk.

The decision to install pollution control devices, which may cost as much as \$500,000, was triggered by the findings of a two-year examination of toxic and radioactive emissions from the school's Parnassus campus.

The \$1.6 million study, believed to be the most exhaustive environmental checkup undergone by any medical center in the country, was started by the university two years ago as a way of soothing community fears about pollution from the school's research laboratories.

UCSF administrators said the report's findings, submitted yesterday to the San Francisco Department of Public Health, should reassure people that it is safe to live next door.

'The Real Issues'

"I think it does effectively lay to rest a tremendous amount of concern," said Vice Chancellor Bruce Spaulding, who oversees environmental health and safety at the campus. "Regrettably, a lot of (the concern) in the past has been speculation or fear. Now we have a real firm basis to get down to the real issues."

The study found that the "worst case" scenario — a person standing at the point of maximum exposure for 70 years — poses a cancer risk of 14 in 1 million, the equivalent of one additional cancer case in San Francisco every 100 years. Installing pollution controls on the sterilizers, the report said, would bring the risk down to 4.7 in 1 million.

"At the beginning, our commitment was that if we found something that could be controlled we would do it," said Spaulding. "We found one thing and immediately set on a course of action for the best available control technology, even though we don't believe it poses a real risk."

Members of an advisory group that serves as liaison between the university and surrounding neigh-

borhoods said they would have to withhold judgment on the highly technical report until hearing the assessment of an independent consultant.

"It sounds like there's no real problem in terms of danger to the community," said Kathe Traynor, who represents the Haight Ashbury Improvement Association on the liaison group. "But I don't know. I would be very curious to have the second party's report, too."

A Second Opinion

UCSF agreed to bring in a second consultant after the advisory group questioned the credibility of the Radian Corp., the firm that performed the environmental analysis. Their concerns stemmed from charges last year that Radian had manipulated data to downplay the risks of dioxin from North Coast pulp mills, a charge the company denied.

Although the university has committed \$10,000 to hire the second consultant, a firm has not yet been selected.

The university launched the environmental review in an effort to shore up relations with neighbors worried about chemical exhausts and about state findings that UCSF researchers had repeatedly violated rules on handling of radioactive materials.

Those concerns had also fueled a rancorous dispute with residents of Laurel Heights, where the university plans to relocate some of its laboratories. Under court order, the university is preparing a new environmental study on the proposed move, which will incorporate data from the Parnassus campus review.

Water, Air and Soil Tested

The Radian findings are based on hundreds of air, water and soil samples collected on and around the campus, computer modeling that projects the likely path of pollutants leaving the campus, and a theoretical analysis that tries to predict affects on the exposed population.

According to the university, the study found that radiation levels are 33 times lower than the government standard, chemical releases to the sewer system are one-sixth the allowable level, and all the air emissions combined posed only slightly more risk than a neighborhood dry cleaner.

Most of that risk comes from

ethylene oxide, a potent carcinogen commonly used in hospitals and laboratories to sterilize surgical implements and research materials.

Putting pollution "scrubbers" on the school's three large sterilizers — two at the hospital, and one at the dental clinic — will cut ethylene oxide emissions by 95 percent, said Leroy Balzer, assistant vice chancellor for environmental health and safety. Installation of the scrubbers will begin this fall, he said.

Steve Hill, a toxics expert with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, said his agency is proposing rules to control ethylene oxide from commercial sterilizers but regulation of hospital sterilizers is "further down the line." He said he knows of no controls on hospital sterilizers anywhere in the nation.

Cancer Risks Assessed

Radian's analysis found a theoretical cancer risk at various points in the surrounding neighborhood that ranged from a low of 1.2 in 1 million, at Douglas Elementary School in Eureka Valley, to a high of 14.2 in 1 million, at the south end of Edgewood Avenue, just east of the campus.

By comparison, the Environmental Protection Agency typically aims for a risk no higher than one in a million when setting limits on pesticide residues in food, but just this week the agency announced new controls on benzene emissions that allow risks as high as one in 10,000.

A projected risk of one in a million means that over a 70-year period one additional case of cancer would be expected for every 1 million people experiencing the maximum expected exposure.

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