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Manufacturing flaw may have caused Sturgeon dioxin

By Jon Frank

Missouri staff writer

The deadly chemical "dioxin" discovered last week in the carbolic acid spilled in Sturgeon Jan. 10 is not usually found in such acid and may have been produced by a flaw in the manufacturing process used by the Monsanto Chemical Co., a Monsanto spokesman said Friday.

The dioxin was discovered by Monsanto after the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency requested testable preparations be made from a reserve sample held by the chemical manufacturer for quality control.

"We have checked samples of ortho-chlorophenol (the acid) before, and we've never found any evidence of dioxins present," said Bob Isham, a public relations official for Monsanto.

"We've got some people looking into it and they are checking to see if something in the process can be

corrected."

Isham said the chemical manufacture is complicated and it may take a while for the firm to find out how the impurities were produced in the material that was spilled in Sturgeon.

The federal government did not know the reserve sample existed until a panel of medical experts suggested calling the manufacturer to find more of the substance for tests.

Harry Gilmer, the on-site EPA of-

ficial, said Monsanto made its own decision to test the sample for dioxin. The firm's action was not because of a request by the EPA, Gilmer said.

Gilmer said EPA requested on Feb. 9 that Monsanto prepare two samples from the control sample and send them to EPA laboratories for testing for dioxin. That evening, Monsanto called and said it had tested the substance and discovered dioxin, but said they were non-toxic, Gilmer said.

It was not until the samples from

Sturgeon were taken to the University of Illinois for testing on a sensitive piece of equipment that the toxic 2-3-7-8 form of dioxin was discovered.

Gilmer said, however, that the exact nature of the dioxin is still not known.

"The 2-3-7-8 is suspected but we do not have positive proof," he said. "My chemist says that it isn't present and I have no reason to doubt his opinion."

How the dioxin, whatever its type, got into the orthochlorophenol remains a

mystery. But Isham said, although Monsanto will attempt to discover its origin, "it is nothing that concerns us."

"We've been making the product for 30 or 40 years and we've never experienced any problems before," he said. "The levels of the dioxin are so low that they are not a problem."

The EPA will continue to monitor air in Sturgeon and take blood samples of those who are showing any physical reaction in cleaning up the spill.

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