

24 firms to pay \$7.7 million to clean up wastes

The New York Times

WASHINGTON — In what the Environmental Protection Agency described Tuesday as the nation's biggest voluntary cleanup yet of a toxic waste dump, 24 companies have agreed to pay \$7.7 million to remove wastes from a site in Seymour, Ind.

Under an agreement with the agency, more than 60,000 barrels of dangerous chemicals, including polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, phenols, benzene and other substances will be removed from the premises of the Seymour Recycling Corp., which one agency official described as one of the "largest and nastiest" hazardous waste operations in the country.

However, agency officials said only the surface of the waste dump would be cleaned up under the agreement with the 24 companies. An estimated \$15 million more would be needed to clean up contaminated soil and ground water beneath the site, they said.

Rita M. Lavelle, the agency's assistant administrator for solid waste, said at a news conference Tuesday that 340 other companies that disposed of waste at the Seymour site would be asked to contribute funds on a prorated basis to clean the soil and ground water. Those who did so would get a pledge of no further litigation by federal, state and local officials, she added.

Lowering its standards

Meanwhile, the Environmental Defense Fund asserted Tuesday that internal EPA documents showed that the agency was dramatically lowering its standards for protecting the public from dangerous hazardous wastes.

The fund, a non-profit group that litigates on environmental issues, said the agency refused to take action to protect a residential neighborhood in Fort Smith, Ark., from soil contaminated with PCBs despite warnings from the Public Health Service that the levels of the chemical presented a significant threat to human health.

The group also said the agency was now considering a weakening of its standards for cleaning up dioxin, a highly toxic substance, at several sites in southeast Missouri.

PCBs are poisonous organic compounds used in transformers and other electrical equipment.

The group quoted a letter from Lavelle to Rep. John Paul Hammerschmidt, R-Ark., in which she reassured him about the dangers involved, saying: "In order for a child to consume an acute lethal dose of PCBs, the child would have to eat about 150 grams of oil-laden dirt, the equivalent of about three large candy bars."

But Ellen Silbergeld, chief toxicologist for the Environmental Defense Fund, said, "EPA's standard for taking emergency action — dead bodies — is repugnant to any notion of protection of human health." She said the agency was not addressing the non-fatal effects of PCBs, including liver disease, changed blood chemistry, chloracne and jaundice.

Dioxin cleanup

The internal documents from the agency contain options for not acting to clean up dioxin in the soil at levels as high as 100 parts per billion. In the past, the agency policy, according to the environmental group, has been to clean up dioxins when they appear even in parts per trillion.

Silbergeld said that the proposal for a change was not based on new information about the hazards of dioxin, but that "the agency is merely looking for ways to avoid taking action at waste sites and in other regulatory areas." As for the PCBs, the program in Arkansas would be addressed through the normal remedial process, the official said.

At the Seymour, Ind., waste site, the agreement to clean up only the surface was made because of the imminent danger of a fire or explosion there.

San Jose, CA
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PCB found in wild fowl

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — High levels of PCB — the now-banned chemical suspected of causing cancer and birth defects — have been found in ducks and predator birds in Montana, state biologists report.

Chemical test results released this week by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks show readings of PCB as high as 50.1 parts per million — almost 17 times higher than the federal standard allowed in the fat of domestic poultry. The tests of 295 specimens also show high levels of an array of pesticides.