Monsanto Backgrounder

EPA/NITRO DIOXIN TESTING

MONSANTO COMPANY / ST. LOUIS, MO.

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EPA Region III (Philadelphia) has announced that it plans to test for dioxin at 12 sites -- four each in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Maryland. One of these sites is Monsanto's Nitro, West Virginia, plant.

Monsanto and EPA have been discussing this proposal since early April, and it is our intention to cooperate with EPA in carrying out this program.

The Nitro plant is a target of the EPA testing program because this facility manufactured the herbicide 2,4,5-T from 1948 to 1969. Dioxin was formed in trace amounts as an unwanted, unavoidable contaminant in this production process.

The 2,4,5-T equipment was dismantled, decontaminated and buried on the plant site over 10 years ago. Except for filter cloths, dust bags and floor sweepings, the 2,4,5-T process was fairly "clean"...solid waste did not normally result from the manufacturing process. The filters, dust bags and floor sweepings were burned in the plant incinerator -- a standard, acceptable practice during the 1950s and 1960s. Any liquid waste generated from this process was sent to the plant sewer system, the same as any other plant effluent in those days.

The Nitro plant's dioxin monitoring program has always focused on assuring that any residual dioxin contamination that might exist from past manufacturing operations is being contained on the plant property and that the employees are not being exposed to it. Thus we have sampled for this compound in monitoring wells at the disposal site, in the plant's waste water and in the water from the Kanawha River. The EPA was advised of this testing program in advance and invited to participate in its implementation.

While we've never found any dioxin down to the limit of detection (10 ppt), this is not to say it isn't present somewhere on the plant site in some harmless, miniscule amount beneath the surface. Indeed, based on published reports of recent research, scientists have established that dioxin is ubiquitous in the environment and stems from most combustion processes. In addition to manufacturing sources, these include power plants, municipal trash incinerators, automobile engines, cigarette smoke and woodburning fireplaces. Dioxin has even been found in the background air in cities throughout the United States in the parts per billion range.

The point of all of this is that dioxin can be found in the environment almost anywhere if one looks for it and has the technical ability to detect it.

The question then becomes not whether dioxin can be found but, rather, does its presence constitute a potential health or environmental hazard.

With respect to Monsanto's Nitro plant, the answer is an emphatic "no." We've assured ourselves that no dioxin problems exist at this site. This particular workforce is probably the most medically studied employee group in the world. Three separate health studies have been conducted on employees at this location including those who worked in the 2,4,5-T unit. Other than a residual skin disease, known as chloracne, no long term health problems that could be associated with exposure to dioxin have ever been found.

Furthermore, we've tested our waste water effluent, the river water and monitoring wells installed to check the integrity of the plant's old disposal site. No environmental problems exist from any dioxin that might be present below the surface stemming from former operations.

So we don't understand this sudden interest in testing for dioxin at a location where no problems exist. This, notwithstanding, Monsanto has always shared information and cooperated with both state and federal agencies at all of our manufacturing locations. We intend to continue with this policy and thus we are cooperating with the EPA on this new request.

Suffice it to say, Monsanto is fully committed to protecting the health and safety of its employees and its plant communities and we'll do whatever we have to do to maintain their trust and confidence. We view this clearly as our responsibility.

At the same time, the EPA, the Centers for Disease Control and the news media have a responsibility to keep the subject of dioxin in perspective. To this point, we agree with the sense of a resolution issued recently by the American Medical Association's House of Delegates which said, in effect, that dioxin has been made the focus of a "witch hunt" through the dissemination of rumors, hearsay, unfounded hysterical pronouncements and doomsday forecasts.

The AMA resolution stated that there is no scientific evidence that dioxin poses an imminent danger to people. The AMA further committed itself to a campaign aimed at countering what it called "hysterical malreporting" about the chemical. We applaud their stand and join them in this effort and would urge others, especially those empowered with the public trust, to do likewise.

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