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DOT seeks safer truck transport of chemicals

The Materials Transportation Bureau in the Transportation Dept. is considering regulatory action to reduce chemical spills in tank truck accidents. MTB is concerned about flammable and combustible liquid spills and is asking for comments on the feasibility of new rules. The bureau announcement is published in the June 28 *Federal Register*. Reports prepared by consultant Dynamic Science (Phoenix) show that certain cargo tanks leak extensively when overturned. Regulators say sloppy maintenance is responsible for much of the problem. Dynamic Science studied 10 trucking companies and found "that very little maintenance is done on critical [carrier] components, such as manholes and vents." Dynamic Science is trying to determine what design changes in manhole closures and venting devices are needed to improve safety.

Few companies are using genetic screening now

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), the research arm of Congress, says preliminary results of an employer survey show that only 1.6% of the companies surveyed are currently using genetic testing, a method by which employees are screened for possible adverse effects of materials they may have to handle. OTA reports, however, that 10 times as many companies may use such tests in the future. The agency is expected to issue a final report in October detailing how and why companies are using the tests. OTA's initial findings were presented to the House Science and Technology Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Subcommittee Chairman Albert Gore, Jr., (D., Tenn.) and other subcommittee members are interested in changing the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and a number of other civil rights laws, to protect workers and others from unnecessary screening. So far, no legislation has been introduced, but the subcommittee is expected to issue a report this fall.

Urging a halt to genetic-weapons development

The National Institutes of Health's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee will compromise with scientists concerned about using genetic engineering in biological warfare. The committee will write to NIH, reminding the organization that RDNA technology may not be used to make biological agents because it is banned by international treaty. The group will not, however, amend NIH guidelines to include a prohibition of genetic work in weapons development, although an amendment was recommended in a May 7 letter to Dr. William Gartland, head of the NIH Office of RDNA Activities. The letter, written by Richard Goldstein of Harvard University, a RAC member, and Richard P. Novick of the Public Health Research Institute of New York, says the RDNA guidelines should include a ban because other guarantees are insufficient. Goldstein and Novick concede that the 1975 biological weapons treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union prohibits "development, production and stockpiling" of biological warfare weapons. "But," they say, "the 'development' prohibition of the treaty is generally interpreted in military circles to mean only the assembly of delivery vehicles." Pentagon officials, however, have often said that the U. S. will not develop new biological weapons without a change in national policy.

CPSC drops a hairdryer proposal

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has dropped a proposed rule that would have required officials to regulate hairdryers containing asbestos under the Consumer Product Safety Act. CPSC says health risks caused by inhalation of asbestos have been sharply reduced over the last three years. Since the rule was proposed in May 1979, all affected manufacturers, importers and private labelers have voluntarily recalled hairdryers containing asbestos fibers. Consumers have returned about two million of the products. Officials three years ago said that forced recall would have to be conducted under the Federal Hazardous Substances Act, rather than under CPSA, unless a new regulation was introduced. Officials say that CPSA gets dangerous products off the market quicker. CPSC, in a *Federal Register* announcement published June 28, emphasizes that a new rule for using the CPSA could be developed if a problem with hairdryers occurs again.

EPA moves to speed pesticide registration

The Environmental Protection Agency says it will classify as "inert" more than 100 chemicals found in antimicrobial pesticide products, a move which could speed pesticide registrations. EPA often requires more testing if substances are considered "active." Active substances are those which play a key role in killing pests. Inert chemicals are fillers, solvents, buffers and other support substances. Antimicrobial products include sterilizers, disinfectants and sanitizers. The new EPA policy, published in the June 30 *Federal Register*, warns that "the inclusion of a chemical on the 'inert' list should not be interpeted to mean that the agency has determined that the substance is toxicologically insignificant." In fact, certain listed ingredients may be more hazardous than the active ingredient contained in the product.