

PRESS CLIP SERVICE

New killer chemical leaks from poison tip

INSIGHT

A NEW PERIL has been discovered at Maendy quarry, the South Wales industrial tip which, as Insight revealed last week, contains at least 31 chemicals, half of them toxic to some degree. Last week—as the Welsh Office sought to play down the dangers—Government scientists had already found another deadly chemical leaking from the tip. It is tri-orthocresyl-phosphate, known as TOCP.

TOCP is an additive used in machine oil. The lethal dose is two grammes, but according to standard works on toxicology, very low amounts in water cause—depending on concentration—nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, paralysis and finally, death.

In the most recently known case of TOCP poisoning, 180 people died in Assam, India, from using contaminated cooking oil. In 1958 in Morocco, 10,000 people were affected from the same cause—nearly 2,000 were crippled. In a similar outbreak in India, 430 people were permanently paralysed.

TOCP was found in water from Maendy just over a week ago by analysis at the Water Pollution Research Laboratory at Stevenage. The laboratory, an agency of the Department of the Environment, has been testing Maendy discharges for some time. The TOCP the laboratory found was at concentrations of "well over" 50 parts per million.

Playing it down

The Government department responsible for handling the Maendy affair, the Welsh Office, has made several statements playing down the extent of the chemical contamination in the tip. And they kept silent about the TOCP.

On Friday, after repeated questioning, the Welsh Office finally admitted: "We have been advised that a new substance has been found at Maendy quarry, and we have arranged for a monitoring analysis to be carried out to establish its presence."

The sudden appearance of TOCP in the Maendy discharge could be explained by the recent disintegration of buried drums. If TOCP concentrations now prove to be constant, then the streams around Maendy will have to be declared a public health risk and the quarry sealed off immediately—at a cost of up to a million pounds.

The discovery of TOCP heightens the importance of the statement which the Secretary of State for Wales, Peter Thomas, is to make in the House of Commons tomorrow. Mr Thomas may be in some difficulty, because it has emerged that the Welsh Office was told of pollution from Maendy by a local vicar three years ago. (Officials had assured Insight that they were only called in around March last year.)

We have also discovered that, in spite of Welsh Office assurances for the past year that its own monitoring of the Maendy effluent showed no worrying levels of chemical contamination, the Office has in fact never monitored the most worrying discharges.

Private samples

All the Office has done is to take samples from pools on the surface of the filled quarry—they are mainly rainwater—and from one stream above the quarry and one stream below. But the most worrying discharges—which Insight revealed last week contained the persistent chemical PCB—run through three dairy farms.

Only on June 4 this year, we have learned, did the Welsh Office write to the three farmers asking for permission to take samples on their land. There has never been a testing programme by the Welsh Office to analyse the stream-bed silt or the surrounding pastures in which PCB has concentrated.

Yet the figures for concentrations of PCB and other contaminants from Maendy—which the Welsh Office has consistently disputed—came from private samples taken in precisely these points.

At the Welsh Office, officials were apparently confident enough last December to dismiss warnings from one of the world's acknowledged experts on PCB, a scientist from Canada, with the phrase: "Dr Platonow, you have a doomwatch mentality."

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