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Tough Rules on Vinyl Chloride Exposure Are Slated in Two Weeks in Interim Plan

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

Tougher restrictions on worker exposure to vinyl chloride will take effect in two weeks in an effort to halt the spread of a type of liver cancer that appears to be caused by contact with the chemical.

In Washington, the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued an emergency temporary health standard sharply cutting the allowable exposure to the industrial chemical starting April 8. It also proposed an even tougher permanent standard that wouldn't allow workers without protective equipment to come in contact with vinyl chloride in any measurable concentration.

The issuance of the standards came after 10 months of investigations by the government, employers and labor unions. Their studies began in late January, when B. F. Goodrich Co. disclosed that four workers at its Louisville vinyl chloride conversion plant had died from the same rare form of liver cancer, angiosarcoma. In subsequent weeks, other concerns, including Union Carbide Corp. and Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., reported other liver cancer deaths among vinyl chloride workers.

Vinyl chloride, normally a gas, is converted in plants such as the Goodrich facility into a powdery substance called polyvinyl chloride, from which a wide range of

everyday plastic products is made. The government's emergency standard and the proposed permanent standard cover workers involved in both the manufacturing of vinyl chloride and its conversion into polyvinyl chloride.

Currently, national standards allow unprotected workers to come in contact with vinyl chloride concentrations of up to 500 parts per million in the atmosphere. But when the temporary standard takes effect two weeks from now, the maximum allowable concentration will drop to 50 parts per million, a level advocated by industry and actually in force on a voluntary basis in many plants. The temporary standard, under the law, can remain in effect for up to six months, while a permanent standard is being formulated.

Bar Direct Exposure

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's proposed permanent standard would bar any direct exposure to vinyl chloride in any measurable concentration. This prohibition is generally believed to rule out concentrations amounting to one part per million or more. The permanent standard, based largely on recommendations of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, also would provide for periodic medical tests for vinyl chloride workers, and specify plant monitoring procedures,

work practices and protective measures needed.

The agency plans to formulate the permanent standard—working from its proposal—under an "expedited procedure" designed to shrink the usually lengthy process to a period of as little as two months. If all goes according to plan, public comments will be gathered, a public hearing held if necessary, and the proposal revised into final form in time for it to take effect in early June.

The temporary standard of 50 parts per million is apparently designed to strike a compromise between the demands of labor and management. The AFL-CIO had been pressing for a stricter temporary measure, and the chemical employers, opposed to any temporary standard, were advocating an eventual maximum of 50 parts per million.

Although it advocates much stricter permanent restrictions, the agency said it concluded from animal research done by an Italian scientist that the interim maximum of 50 parts per million should prove safe over the short life of the temporary standard.

But Sheldon Samuels, safety and health director of the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, attacked the temporary measure as ineffective. He charged that the federal agency had misinterpreted the Italian research, and called for a temporary standard requiring improved protection for workers exposed to all levels of vinyl chloride.

"The 50 parts per million level is so high," he said, "that the United Rubber Workers union tells us that only 50% of the

plants it represents would have to make any changes at all to meet it." In fact, he added, at least six vinyl chloride plants already operate at levels as low as 10 parts per million.

"Important Step Forward"

Despite his criticism of the temporary standard, however, Mr. Samuels praised the proposed tougher permanent standard as "an important step forward" and said federal officials had pledged that it would cover workers' handling of vinyl chloride in all manufacturing processes.

An estimated 5,500 workers at 25 plants operated by 10 U.S. manufacturers are exposed to vinyl chloride, and thus would be affected by the standards.

Both B. F. Goodrich and Union Carbide said they are already operating their vinyl chloride plants within the new standards. The companies said that even before the government's announcement, they had reduced vinyl chloride levels to below the 50 parts per million specified in the emergency standard.

The companies said they also provided such protective gear as respirators and protective clothing to employees. In addition, they are installing improved ventilation equipment and the use of automatic shut-off valves to prevent leaks and spills.

Goodrich said it had been working to reduce vinyl chloride levels in its plants since 1968. It said it had been working to reduce vinyl chloride levels in its plants since 1968. It said it had been working to reduce vinyl chloride levels in its plants since 1968.

the liver cancer death, which occurred in 1961. The employee involved had been in production of vinyl chloride monomer for no longer made at the

plant. Union Carbide Inc. said it has installed sensitive equipment at its Ohio polyvinyl chloride plant to monitor the air and to

test for a health hazard. It has a staff of technicians under the supervision of a toxicologist, to super-

vising program at Painesville, Ohio. A spokeswoman against this thing a

year ago after the first evidence came in. She said that there could be a hazard.

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