Unwelcome Incinerator

Fight Over PCBs Shows How Hard It Is To Destroy Chemicals and Satisfy People

By Douglas Martin
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

LOGAN TOWNSHIP, N.J. – The smiling executive plunges two fingers into a quart jar of clear liquid: the Monsanto subsidiary consists of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, the only toxic chemicals whose manufacture is specifically outlawed by Congress.

"You've got a lot worse stuff than this in your medicine cabinet," he asserts.

Maybe. But just try telling that to residents of this surprisingly rural community in the industrialized Delaware River Valley. Although many of them work in nearby chemical plants, the townspeople are leaping mad at the prospect that thousands of pounds of PCBs will be trucked into a plant operated here by Rollins Environmental Services Inc., a chemical-waste-disposal company.

The modernistic facility, which is surrounded by acres of tomato and pepper fields, has been here for about a decade. Now, along with another Rollins plant in Deer Park, Texas, and a disposal plant in El Dorado, Ark., it has applied to become one of the first federally sanctioned sites for incinerating PCBs. None has yet been approved.

The townspeople's angry reaction will undoubtedly be repeated in other communities as the nation wrestles with the problem of finding places to destroy toxic wastes. "They're using us as guinea pigs," says Mary Ware, the young deputy township clerk, who worries that the chemicals could harm her two children.

"Everybody feels they've had it shoved down their throat," says Glen Hughes, a heavy-equipment operator. Rosemary Wilson, the owner of a country store, says she'll "put the place up for sale" if the PCB burning begins.

Pollution Feared

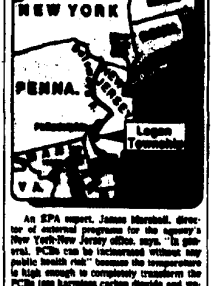
The opponents are a collection of local people, including housewives, laborers, some professional people and local officials. They say, among other things, that PCB burning would pollute nearby Raccoon Creek, poison underground water supplies and dramatically depress land values. And they recall a 1977 explosion at the plant that killed six workers.

The township's indignation is fueled by vehement distrust of Rollins, which is a subsidiary of BLC Corp., and was one of the first companies to receive a legislative assurance of destroying toxic chemicals. At a hearing last week, residents and officials of the Environmental Protection Agency that the company's operations here have been characterized by leaking drums, endless odors and sloppy procedures.

The company denied all such charges. It says that it does and will do an effective job safely. But EPA officials at the hearing said they were proposing a federal suit aimed at halting any burning.

Rollins' environmental groups aren't directly involved in the dispute; more than most people, they realize the need to dispose of toxic chemicals somehow. However, some of the representatives are trying to make sure that things are done as safely as possible at Logan Township.

Scientists say there have proved that PCBs can be safely and completely destroyed by incineration. Moreover, officials of the Environmental Protection Agency have vowed they won't let the burning begin until they're absolutely satisfied that people will be protected.



An EPA report, James Marshall, director of external programs for the agency's New York-New Jersey office, says, "In general, PCBs can be incinerated without any public health risk" because the temperature is high enough to completely transform the PCBs into harmless carbon dioxide and water. If some PCBs did escape, he says, the smokestack is constructed in such a way as to disperse them high enough and far enough to minimize health risks.

As for any danger before incineration, he says, there are "very clear requirements" spelled out to safeguard the public during transport, handling and storage.

Be that as it may, says Mayor John Wright, who works in a Du Pont chemical plant, "no town in its right mind is going to let those kinds of things come in." Clearly, the people here won't be happy until the Rollins plant is turned out of existence. "It's morally not right," declares A. J. Dilkush, a lawyer, said at the hearing.

All of which strikes some observers as distressingly ironic. For years, critics have complained PCBs, possibly a possible cause of the chemicals' turning up in the Hudson River, North Carolina chicken and even mother's milk. Now that the federal government has set rigid rules for burning the stuff as thoroughly that 99.9% of what is burned—and is supposed to be destroyed, some people are digging in their toes. A similar tactic is raging in El Dorado.

The Midnight Dumper

"Everybody wants it picked up; nobody wants it put down," says Edmund C. Bush, the EPA's regional administrator for New York and New Jersey.

That could be troublesome. If society doesn't give industry a place to dispose of toxic waste, Mr. Bush adds, "what are they going to do?" The answer has even question economists: "give it to the midnight dumper" who illegally gets rid of toxic wastes at night by the side of the road or in vacant lots.

Mr. Bush's blunt considerations carries weighty implications, extending well beyond the 440 million pounds of PCB wastes said to be known about the environment and the 750 million pounds of PCBs still in use. The EPA says it may cost $50 billion to clean up past years' midnight dumping of toxic chemicals. Further, it is calculated that each year enough new hazardous waste is produced—and, for the most part, improperly discarded—to fill every street and alley in Manhattan to knee level.

PCBs play an important role in this national horror story. Congress specifically banned their manufacture in the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976, because they are suspected of causing cancer and birth defects. Production was to be phased out by 1979, and the last supply PCBs were the only substance so singled out.

Not Made Since 1977

Primarily used as insulators in electrical equipment, PCBs haven't been made since 1977. (There are adequate substitutes.) Since the 750 million pounds still in use will be phased out over the next 40 years, PCBs will increasingly seem solely as garbage—dangerous garbage. The planned incineration method appears to be the only way to effectively get rid of it. "It's a sparky issue," acknowledges Jack Lucier, the Monsanto executive who immersed his fingers in the PCB jar.

Rollins's president, William S. Pfeiffer, agrees. "We're never going to get people to say, 'Hey, I'd be glad to have a load of radioactive,'" he says impatiently. Nonetheless, the company already spent seven years and millions of dollars to get the go-ahead for the PCBs.

The local opposition couldn't care less. "The owner of Monsanto have not been developers, only industrialists," said a sign planted in front of the Rollins plant gate. Another of the townspeople's numerous paraphrases of the popular song "You Light Up My Life," it said, "You Make Up My Life."

Such emotion-charged issues rarely settle out of context. As a public hearing last spring, a woman began lecturing about safety, hurling insults at Rollins officials. "If you'd had a life," Mr. Pfeiffer says "you would have seen it."

Those Don't Help

Even company-sponsored tours of the plant don't usually dispel fears. Dressed in white coveralls and shoulder-length rubber boots, the visitors file past stacks of drums to be tested with dyed and smokestacks, and a blinking 30-foot smokestack. To boot, the operations regularly emits a "noticeable smell," says Rollins' Skwirbish, a leading opponent.

Rollins says it has already proved it can do a proper job of disposing of some 10,000 different kinds of hazardous chemicals—in Logan Township, Deer Park and Ocean Springs, La. It even burned PCBs once for more stringent federal rules went into effect. The company has been unsuccessful in lodging the EPA determine the tougher standards.

At least one improvement is contemplated. "It's better to have them burned here and then dumped nowhere," says Owen O'Rourke, who operates a vegetable stand across the road from the plant. "A lot of people are coming [chemicals are hauled on trucks], and they forget all the deep end."

Explosive Reminder

The debate is made unpleasantly current by the memory of the fatal explosion in November ago that sent black smoke billowing for miles and of heat in the air. Thousands died. Many people were. "Many people aren't to be trusted in any way, shape or form."

Rollins, which contends that the explosion was precipitated by outside contractors, not by its own employees, says the contractors actually proved the plant's safety. "We can't guarantee that there won't be accidents," he says, but nobody suggests that that such consequences "would ever occur" on the plant grounds. Rollins's Mr. Lucier says.

Rollins hasn't capitulate and played no part in crushing the incinerator, the company says. But one of 14 trucks involved did have residue containing PCBs in it, and one worker at the accident site was exposed to PCBs. Also, the EPA says that PCBs might have escaped into the atmosphere.

The whole controversy could be resolved within the next few months the EPA issues a combined a test-burn license to consider the effectiveness of Rollins's incinerating PCBs. Or the test could be delayed by the Rollins refusal to accept 2,700 drums Polaroidum San Mateo Wright fears that the townspeople may resort to violence to halt the burning. "We're trying to stop it peacefully," he says.

EPA officials say that the test-burn isn't emotionally required by law and that they are drawing it primarily to be sure the concerns of safety. They promise that it will be closely monitored. "The press will be crawling with Feds," an agency spokesman says.

In the end, the dispute comes down to a question of balancing the economic need to safely dispose of toxic chemicals with other undesirable land values to use it does elsewhere.

"In this part of the woods, the general view is 'Let's do it all to Nevada,'" Rollins's Mr. Lucier says. He doubts that the people in Nevada would agree.

MONS 008837

ROXBORO, N.C.
COURIER TIMES
D. 8,000

JUN 14 1979

PCB problem illustrates woeful national ignorance

EDITORIAL

It's really difficult to know what the best solution is for disposing of the PCB-contaminated soil along 210 miles of North Carolina highways, including that along a four-to-six mile stretch of N C. 49 North in Person County. It's particularly difficult because the people you would expect to have some expertise in such matters cannot even agree on whether the PCB in question presents a health risk to North Carolina citizens.

For example, over in Halifax County where Robert E (Buck) Ward Jr. of Raleigh was being tried last week on charges of being an accessory and conspirator in the PCB dumpings (he was acquitted of all counts by a jury this week), two doctors gave corrobarative testimony regarding the threat of PCB to humans and animals. Both said they felt the PCB indeed posed no such threat and should be left where it is.

The testimony appeared to be significant in that both doctors — Dr. Leonard Goldwater and Dr. R. Emmett Kelly — have had experience in treating patients exposed to heavy concentrations of PCB. Dr. Goldwater has been a consultant with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences on environmental problems. Dr. Kelly formerly was with Monsanto Chemical Co., which used to manufacture PCB.

Dr. Kelly told the court that for 20 years he regularly examined Monsanto employees who he said were "practically bathing in this stuff (PCB)" and that he found no health problems other than a form of acne.

Dr. Goldwater said he had examined thousands of people who had been exposed to PCB without ill effects.

Responding to a question as to wether the PCB dumped in North Carolina could cause cancer, Dr. Goldwater said, "The probability is so remote that everyone should forget it. The harm done by frightening everyone is much worse than the long-term chemical threat." Dr. Kelly agreed that the amount of the chemical dumped along N C. roadways is not a significant health threat

On the other side of the coin, Dr Renate Kimbrough, a pathologist-toxicologist with the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, testified that her laboratory experiments showed that rats and mice developed liver cancer and other maladies after they were fed PCB. She said she deduced from those experiments that the PCB on N.C. roads "could cause harm" to humans and animals

So, who is to be believed? And posing that question is not meant to suggest in this instance that the conclusion of Drs Goldwater and Kelly are any more or less valid than the conclusion of Dr Kimbrough or vice versa. But the diversity of opinion on the N C PCB goes to point out just how incredibly unknowledgeable this nation is about the myriad chemicals that are used (and misused) daily all around us Consequently, as the PCB problem aptly illustrates, we are almost totally unprepared to deal certainly and effectively with accidents involving toxic or potencially toxic chemicals

North Carolina already has spent between $1 million and $2 million, according to Gov James B. Hunt Jr., just trying to get a handle on the PCB mess The Governor suggests that the disposal of the contaminated soil may entail yet another $3 million, and even now no one is quite sure about the best disposal method-in-place treatment, storage in multiple sites or at one large site

Certainly, the Governor's position of having to make the ultimate decision is not an enviable one, particularly in view of the apparent fact that when it comes to PCB, and many other chemicals, no one knows for sure what the deuce they're talking about Least of all, so it seems, the federal Environmental Protection Agency which has got to be one of the most wishy-washy agencies in the whole federal bureaucracy

We trust a satisfactory solution to the PCB problem can be attained. Duly beyond that, we would like to see the State of North Carolina use the PCB episode as a springboard to taking the lead in the development of sound meaningful knowledge about toxic chemicals and how to deal with them Because no one else seems to be adequately doing the job

MONS 008838