Debating Health vs. Jobs

Plastics Industry Mobilizes to Thwart Tough Rules on Handling Vinyl Chloride

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WASHINGTON — As the federal government moves closer to adopting stringent controls over handling of the ubiquitous industrial chemical vinyl chloride, manufacturers who use it are mobilizing to try to show that the controls would prove economically disastrous.

The rules would be utterly unworkable, the companies say, and industry would lose an essential manufacturing material. In consequence, they add, makers of plastic pipe, auto parts, phonograph records and many more products would be driven to the wall. And, they contend, thousands of jobs would vanish.

This gloomy picture is likely to dominate Labor Department hearings, beginning today, on planned standards for eliminating the exposure of plastics-industry workers to the chemical, which is suspected of causing cancer.

Exposure to vinyl chloride, a gas, has been linked by researchers to 19 cases of a rare liver cancer, angiosarcoma, among workers handling it in the U.S. and other countries; in 16 of these cases, death resulted. In addition, angiosarcoma has recently been blamed for the death of two employees in plants handling polyvinyl chloride, the powdered derivative of vinyl-chloride gas that is fabricated into a wide range of plastic products. (Two other deaths from angiosarcoma have been discovered among people living in the vicinity of plants using polyvinyl chloride.)

In April, the Labor Department's occupational safety and health administration imposed a temporary emergency standard limiting workers' exposure to vinyl-chloride gas to 50 parts per million in the air they breathe, a sharp reduction from the previous limit of 500 parts. Now, the agency is proposing—and witnesses at this week's hearings will debate—[illegible] exposure permanently [illegible] level at all.

Although the [illegible] the emergency ruling, its voice has so far been weaker than that of organized labor and various scientific groups, which back the tough rules.

Doom for the Industry?

At this week's hearings, however, the industry is expected to argue strongly that the "no-detectable" exposure plan would spell doom for the several dozen plants that make vinyl chloride gas or turn it into polyvinyl chloride powder or resin, and for most of the hundreds of plants that turn polyvinyl chloride into plastic products.

The standard would require that most operations in the production of vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride, which employs an estimated 6,500 workers, be conducted in closed-off, regulated areas where exposure can be controlled by ventilation devices or other methods. In addition, some operations of plants turning polyvinyl chloride into products, which are said to employ up to 700,000 workers, would be subjected to similar stringent engineering rules if those operations could cause the polyvinyl chloride powder or resin to release trapped quantities of raw vinyl chloride gas.

Last week the Society of the Plastics Industry, a trade group, asserted that sufficient technology doesn't exist to meet the proposed standard and warned that much of the vinyl and polyvinyl chloride industry might have to close if the standard goes into effect. The society predicted that 1.6 million jobs and "at least $65 billion" in sales and production could be lost.

Ralph Harding Jr., president of the society, said that the proposed standard "is technologically infeasible to achieve, even with the highly sophisticated methods of in-plant control that have been developed by the industry over the years. If the proposed 'no-detectable-level' standard is adopted, the vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride resin producing industries will be forced to close down immediately."

The Labor and Health View

A number of labor-union and occupational-health experts are expected to dispute the society's claim at the hearings. They contend that it is possible to meet the standard without closing the industry.

But harsh predictions are contained in many of the more than 125 letters from plastics firms already on file with the Labor Department. The letters, representing the writers' formal "comments" on the planned rules, give an indication of the probable tone of this week's hearings. Although most letters concede that some controls are needed on vinyl chloride, most contend that the proposed measures would mean nothing less than the collapse of their industry.

Almost all the letters come from users of polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, and not companies directly handling vinyl chloride itself or those turning it into PVC. In most cases, they explain that their suppliers of PVC have told them the standards will make it impossible for them to continue producing the raw plastic. Urged to write to the government, the PVC users have done so, forecasting their financial ruin.

"Unless a reasonable approach is taken," wrote Frank Groeneveld Jr., president of a plastic-pipe-extruding firm in Florida, "it could mean the destruction of many small businesses such as ours where we have invested our life savings."

R. J. Clayton, chairman of Louver Drape Inc., a California maker of PVC window blinds and folding doors, wrote that "37 years ago, at the depth of the depression, I started a one-man business which has grown today where we do approximately $7 million worth of business and employ over 200 people." If the new rules are imposed, he said, "we'd be back to a one-man business overnight."

One firm, Custom Trim Products Inc., which makes plastic trim for several big auto makers, warned that the new rules could cut off its supply of PVC resins, ending its production and causing it to risk lawsuits by Detroit for failure to fulfill supply contracts. The firm, an officer wrote, "would undoubtedly be forced into bankruptcy."

Hubbard Apiaries, a beekeeping company in Onsted, Mich., wrote to declare that it couldn't remain in business if PVC supplies were threatened because its honey is sold in PVC bottles and glass bottles are scarce as a result of a soda-ash shortage.

In fact, many of the letters contended that PVC is already in short supply, highly versatile and absolutely necessary for a variety of important uses.

Spokesmen for the record industry insisted that the plastic is vital to its operations. MCA Records Inc. contended that if the standards forced PVC production to end, "our industry would be forced out of business."

The National Association of Home Builders said the standards could drive the rising costs of housing even higher by forcing builders to abandon economical PVC housing components. It warned that such a development could mean "sorely needed housing would be beyond the reach of an increasingly large segment of the public."

Norton Co.'s plastics and synthetics division, which makes tubing for medical uses, warned that if the new rules curbed supplies of PVC, desperately needed equipment used in kidney dialysis and heart surgery might become unavailable. And Graniteville Co. of Graniteville, S.C., a maker of fire-retardant tents and tent material, called PVC "the most important component" in its products.

What's more, Arthur Culbertson, a Florida plastics executive, and Gerald Kessler, an officer of an Ohio plastics company, urged modification of the proposed standards on the grounds that they themselves had had long personal exposure to vinyl chloride without ill effects.

Most of the letter writers acknowledged the need to protect workers from the possibility of liver cancer. But they urged delay in imposing such harsh restrictions, both to give scientists time for further research and to allow the businesses to phase in the new controls.

But one writer took a decidedly less sympathetic view of the dangers of death from vinyl chloride. Jameson Crane, of Crane Plastics Inc., in Columbus, Ohio, wrote: "We continue to be impressed with the comparison of the number of deaths annually due to suicide prompted by loss of jobs, versus the 19 angiosarcoma deaths world-wide over 35 years of PVC production."

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