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2,4,5-T's Dioxin Turns Out to Be Harmless to Man

Preliminary results from tests being run by the Department of Agriculture on recently-restricted weedkillers formulated from the chemical 2,4,5-T to detect the dioxin impurities that might cause birth deformities have indicated that the contaminant is generally present, but only at very low levels which constitute no known hazard to human health.

This was disclosed last week in an announcement from the department and in testimony given to the Senate environmental subcommittee by Dr. George W. Irving, Administrator of the Agricultural Research Service.

Monsanto Eliminating Problem

In the case of the herbicide samples made from 2,4,5-T produced by Monsanto Company, St. Louis, Mo., relatively high levels of the contaminant were found, the announcement said, but the company has stopped the manufacture of the chemical, recalled stocks from the formulators and is reprocessing its remaining stock to eliminate the dioxin problem.

The department said that industry spokesmen have indicated that the remaining manufacturers of the chemical are taking steps to avoid dioxin contamination which is associated with the manufacturing process.

Use of 2,4,5-T weedkillers was placed under sharp restrictions by the department earlier this year following disclosure of tests made of the chemical by Bionetics Laboratories, Inc., for the Department of Health, Education & Welfare, indicating that the chemical was the cause of birth defects in some laboratory animals.

Some of the chemical used in the Bionetics study was found to contain as much as 27 parts per million of tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin, whereas only about 1 ppm of the contaminant was found in herbicides generally.

As a result of the Bionetics studies, USDA launched its test program last

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February for detection of the content of 2,4,5-T and sixteen other herbicides, fungicides and insecticides then being marketed.

Last week's announcement of "no known hazard to human health" was the first disclosure of the preliminary results.

In reporting on the tests to the Senate subcommittee, headed by Sen. Philip A. Hart of Michigan last week, Dr. Irving also disclosed that the department is tightening its stand on the meaning of the terms "imminent hazard" as used in the pesticide registration law.

Under the law, the department may suspend a registration and halt interstate shipments of a pesticide immediately only on a finding of "imminent hazard" to health. When a registration is cancelled, if the producer protests he can continue shipments and sales until the cancellation order is adjudicated.

Agrees With Court Ruling

Dr. Irving said that the department has decided to concur in a ruling of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals that the term "imminent hazard" in the pesticide law should be interpreted the same as in the drug law; i.e., an imminent hazard exists when evidence shows the product to be so unsafe as to create a public health situation that cannot be allowed to continue during a hearing.

He added that he agrees with the statement of the Surgeon General that any substance that can cause cancer twenty years later is an "imminent hazard" to health when used.

Dr. Irving agreed with Sen. Hart that "without a doubt, there is need for legislation to strengthen and extend federal regulation over pesticides" but urged the senator to defer his bill, S 3866, until the administration submits its recommendations to Congress.

"We know," Dr. Irving said, "that intensive consideration is being given to a package of legislative recommendations that will be far-reaching in extending federal control over the use of pesticides. The Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency will have full responsibility for effective enforcement of pesticides regulations and it would appear that he would desire to be heard with regard to what specific legislation is needed."

The Environmental Protection Agency is coming into being as a result of a reorganization of government activities in the pesticide field now going through its final stages. The Administrator of the new agency is yet to be appointed by President Nixon.

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