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NIOSH finds more brain cancers among chemical workers in Texas plants

Concern over brain cancer deaths among chemical workers continued to mount last week with the discovery that five deaths among former employees at Monsanto's Texas City, Tex., chemical intermediates plant were attributable to brain tumors, and that two of the deaths could have been caused by the type of cancer known as glioblastoma multiform.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health have been investigating brain-cancer deaths since the discovery that nine employees of Union Carbide's Texas City plant died of glioblastoma between 1962 and 1978. One employee with glioblastoma is still living (CW, Feb. 28, p. 22).

OSHA began investigating deaths at the Monsanto plant as the result of a "compliance complaint" received shortly after the discovery of the cancers at Union Carbide. The cases at Monsanto were reported after an initial review of 1,200-1,300 health records of employees and former employees at the plant. Spokesmen for Monsanto say that only two of the deaths could be attributed to glioblastoma, and that there is "no evidence" that the other three were of that rare form of cancer.

Initial indications were that the deaths at both plants could be linked to vinyl chloride monomer but Ben Bare, senior industrial hygienist with OSHA's area office, says several chemicals are now being studied and "the list is growing every day." Included: acrylonitrile, ethylene oxide, polyethylene and their intermediates. Monsanto, which has not made VCM at Texas City since 1968, says it is conducting a study of its employees "stretching back 30 years" and will start another check in phases in cooperation with OSHA and NIOSH.

Vinyl chloride is a suspect as the cause of the cancers because several studies have linked VCM to glioblastoma and other types of brain tumors and because many of the workers with glioblastoma had been exposed to VCM. One study that made a connection between VCM and glioblastoma was sponsored by the Manufacturing Chemists Assn. and published early last year. The study, conducted by Equitable Environmental Health Inc. (Rockville, Md.), examined the death certificates of 9,677 workers exposed to VCM at 34 plants. As well as reporting the incidence of angiosarcoma, the main type of cancer

linked to VCM, the study showed an excess of brain tumor deaths—12 where statistically there should have been six.

And now there is evidence that the incidence may be even higher than expected. Although 431 death certificates from Union Carbide's Texas City plant were included in the MCA study, none were for victims of glioblastoma. According to Joseph Wagoner, director of OSHA's office of carcinogen identification, "There were no brain cancers among that group of workers" although he points out that the criteria for selecting workers may have inadvertently excluded those with glioblastoma.

Carbide says it submitted data in answer to specific requests by the MCA study group. And the extent of the Carbide workers' exposure to VCM is uncertain. According to Sanford Leffingwell, who heads the NIOSH study team, five workers were clearly exposed, and for two others, evidence is "tenuous." □

Indians unhappy with paper firms' land offer

The continuing dispute between Maine's tribal Indians, state leaders and paper companies apparently is not over. Although the state's political leaders and paper makers have endorsed a White House proposal for a \$37-million out-of-court settlement of land claims by the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes, the Indians are still not ready to okay the deal. The tribes, faced with a Mar. 11 deadline for a decision on the settlement package, said they will seek an extension because of misgivings about the land offerings.

Under the White House plan, the federal government would pay \$27 million to the Indians to end their claims to 12.5 million acres of Maine land. The government would also give them \$10 million to buy timberland from some of the state's paper firms.

Attorneys for the paper companies are still in the process of identifying possible parcels. But the Indians reportedly are unhappy with the location of some of the land and contend that the offerings include inferior tracts. One tribal leader said some of the land is "very average, like the top of a mountain." He added, "The tribes don't want their new territory to consist of isolated parcels scattered all over the state."

The tribes did not specify how much extra time they will need to consider the deal. They have taken their deadline request to the U.S. District Court in Portland. □

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Judge lets EPA ban on 2,4,5-T stand

Dow Chemical and 10 co-plaintiffs lost the first round in their attempt to roll back the Environmental Protection Agency's Mar. 1 emergency suspension on use of the herbicides 2,4,5-T (trichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and Silvex.

The 11 companies and trade associations, including users and makers of the herbicides and agricultural and forest-products groups, had sought a temporary injunction against EPA's action in U.S. District Court in Flint, Mich. They asked that the move be found "arbitrary and capricious and done without observance of procedures required by law."

Although U.S. District Court Judge James Harvey declined to rule on the case, he did grant a request for an expedited schedule to review the facts of the ban, which requires EPA officials to appear in Flint. In response to EPA's bid for additional time to prepare its case, Judge Harvey ordered the hearing for Mar. 19.

Certain to come out at the hearing are Dow's sharp criticisms of the EPA data that led the agency to suspend use of 2,4,5-T. An EPA study of eight women in the Alsea Basin of Oregon found an association between 2,4,5-T sprayings in the area and 13 miscarriages they suffered between 1972 and 1977 (CW, Mar. 7, p. 21). The agency reported a peak in the spontaneous abortion rate four to six weeks after the herbicide was sprayed on forests near their homes.

But Dow notes that, "Upon review of this Oregon study, we find the researchers have used inappropriate data; ignored other obvious causes of miscarriages; and applied selective statistical manipulations of the data . . . their research failed to demonstrate any cause/effect relationship between 2,4,5-T and spontaneous abortions."

Perry Gehring, Dow director of health and environmental research, notes that EPA's "peak" theory doesn't hold up, since the accumulation of toxins necessary to cause miscarriages in the women would occur gradually. A gradual incidence, rather than a sudden peak of miscarriages, would be more likely, he said. In addition, miscarriage peaks occur throughout the nation, even in June when the Oregon women aborted, Gehring said.

Another Dow criticism: EPA measured hospitalized spontaneous abortions but, because the Alsea region has so few physicians who treat women with miscarriages in their offices, the women went to hospitals more often than in the control region.