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U.S. clamps new lid on plastic gas

CHICAGO (AP) — Plastics industry officials quickly denounced and filed lawsuits contesting new federal safety standards reducing worker exposure to vinyl chloride, a gas that may cause cancer.

One industry officials called the standards "economically unrealistic, technically unfeasible, politically motivated and medically ridiculous."

President Todd C. Walker of the Firestone Plastics Co., a division of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co., added in a statement yesterday that the standard "puts the vinyl plastics industry on a collision course with economic disaster. More importantly, it throws two million jobs down the drain, according to an economic impact study made earlier this year by Arthur Little & Co.," an industrial consulting firm.

Asst U.S. Labor Secretary John H. Stender, who had announced the new Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards earlier yesterday, said some plants will have trouble meeting the tightened standards, but he added, "This will not cause the industry to shut down."

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THE STRICTER regulations for vinyl chloride, a chemical used in numerous plastic products, would cover 7,500 U.S. plants with 350,000 workers. Present standards will remain in effect until January with a gradual, one-year transition to the tighter standards, Stender said.

Stender said provisions would allow a company that cannot meet the standards to ask for a variance or a time extension.

At least two industrial groups immediately filed court actions contesting the new standards.

The Society of the Plastics Industry Inc., which represents more than 90 per cent of vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride producers, filed suit in New York asking the U.S. Court of Appeals for judicial review. A separate suit was filed by the Hooker Chemical Co., of Stamford, Conn.

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AFTER SEVERAL deaths from a rare liver cancer, thought to be related to handling vinyl chloride were reported, the government in April ordered an emergency lowering from the then-prevailing limit of 500 parts per million to which workers could be exposed.

Preliminary tests conducted in Northbrook, Ill., later that month showed that test mice developed liver cancer when exposed to concentrations of 50 parts per million of vinyl chloride.

The new standards announced by Stender state that:

- Current maximum levels will remain in effect until next January. They allow workers handling polymer vinyl chloride to be exposed to up to 50 parts per million in eight hours.
- In 1975, the level must drop to one part per million over any eight-hour period and five parts averaged over any period no longer than 15 minutes.
- By Jan. 1, 1976, any worker exposed to more than the eight-hour or 15-minute limits for the chemical must have a respirator. Until then, respirators are optional if levels remain less than 25 parts per million.
- Penalties for violators include a maximum of $10,000 fine and six months in prison.

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