

Local industries release figures on damage "worst-case" chemical leaks could cause

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Of the Post-Dispatch

Treading lightly on a delicate subject, leaders of industry and safety agencies disclosed details Tuesday about potential but unlikely chemical leaks that could threaten everyone in the St. Louis region.

There has never been a mas-

sive vapor-release accident here and probably never will be, they emphasized.

But a federal rule requires reporting worst-case scenario risks to the Environmental Protection Agency for the public record by June 21.

Boeing, Anheuser-Busch, Solutia and others took extra steps by joining emergency manage-

ment officials from Missouri and Illinois in a public release of summaries of their required "Risk Management Plans."

One of the most dramatic examples in the material they provided was an assessment by Clark Refining & Marketing that its plant in Hartford could spew enough hydrofluoric acid to
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Scenarios

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cause significant burns to people up to 17 miles away.

The threatened territory could include the northern half of St. Louis and parts of North County as far west as Lambert Field.

The EPA defines a worst-case situation as a leak that empties the largest container of dangerous material at the site, under the worst possible weather conditions, with failure of all safety systems and no emergency response to stop it.

"We're behind this as a good law, but we've got some real problems about the worst-case scenario rule," said Forrest Lauher, manager of the Clark refinery. "It's going to scare the heck out of some people."

He added, "We've been using HF (hydrofluoric acid) for 29 years and we've never once had any of it get off the site."

Patrick Justis, an environmental specialist for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, said, "A worst-case scenario makes a lot of assumptions, mostly not plausible." He said a scaled-down alternative-release scenario, also required by the EPA, is more realistic.

Clark Refining calculated its alternative risk distance as 0.4 mile, which Lauher said barely reaches the nearest home.

Most of this information was already available to fire and rescue teams under other hazardous material reporting requirements. The public assessment was added to the Clean Air Act in 1990, effective this month.

Tuesday's conference, organized by the Safety Council of Greater St. Louis at its office downtown, may surprise some people by what threats do not exist.

For example, Boeing's sprawling military aircraft plant in St. Louis and missile plant in St. Charles County do not store quantities of dangerous materials large enough for reporting under the new EPA rule.

Neither do two Solutia Inc. chemical manufacturing sites in St. Louis: the Carondelet Plant at 8201 Idaho Avenue and the John F. Queeny Plant at 201 Russell Boulevard.

But Solutia's W.G. Krummrich Plant in Sauget could poison people up to 14 miles away in a massive chlorine leak, or burn people up to 20 miles away with nitric acid. The more realistic alternative assessments are less than one mile.

Hydrogen fluoride, a corrosive gas that can cause severe health effects in high concentration, could fan out for 16 miles if there were a catastrophe at Chemtech Products Inc. in Alorton. The cloud could travel as far west as Ladue, or north to Glen Carbon.

Chlorine, a deadly poison in high concentration, is a threat at all wa-

ter purification plants. Worst-case distances ranged from just 0.9 mile at four plants operated by the Illinois-American Water Co., to 9.9 miles for the city of St. Louis Water Division plants at Howard Bend and the Chain of Rocks.

Krista Durlas, safety officer for the city water system, said her agency was among many of Tuesday's participants holding regular meetings with neighbors, even though the EPA does not require it.

"The public response has been very positive because of our safety record," Durlas explained. "Our last release of chlorine was in 1967."

St. Louis County Water Co. put worst-case risks at 1.3 miles for its North (Florissant), Meramec (near Arnold) and South (Sunset Hills) plants, and 9.9 miles for the Central Plant (Maryland Heights).

The Anheuser-Busch brewery on the city's South Side uses highly corrosive anhydrous ammonia as a refrigerant, with a worst-case risk of 2.3 miles (but an alternative risk of just 0.1 mile).