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Why we can't relax the fight for worker safety

ABOUT 100 BILLS have been introduced in Congress to weaken or even to repeal the three-year-old Occupational Safety and Health Act. Although some of the bills are not life-or-death matters, anyone who saw the story of Louisville's B. F. Goodrich Company polyvinyl chloride plant in a CBS television documentary Saturday night must wonder at the over-all thrust of such criticisms of federal safety standards.

The network showed private and public officials reacting swiftly to the first reports from the Louisville plant that three production workers had died of a rare liver cancer. It reviewed the controversy over safety standards inside plants which had been producing this plastic for as long as 30 years, and such allied questions as how much vinyl chloride gas should be allowed to escape into the atmosphere or whether hazards exist for users of products fabricated from polyvinyl chloride.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has needed prodding in some instances to get its complex inspection and standards-setting machinery for industrial safety into motion. Working people, on the one hand, want the strictest standards; industry people, on the other, talk of economic realism. One reason for occasional OSHA delays is that it's often caught in the middle.

Moreover, it takes time to decide on allowable levels of chemicals, such as polyvinyl chloride, asbestos and beryllium, which may imperil health outside a plant as well as in it. But if anything is clear from the Louisville scare, it's that Congress could do more, not less, to make OSHA more effective in the long-protracted struggle for worker safety.

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Vinyl-chloride fumes involved

Sewer-construction delay granted, but who pays?

By MARTIN E. BIEMER
Louisville Times Staff Writer

Vinyl chloride, storm drainage and flooded basements drew the attention of the Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) board yesterday.

In a 90-minute meeting, the board:

- Learned that it may have to go to court to determine who must pay for a costly construction delay caused by vinyl chloride and other chemical fumes in a large sewer line near the B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. plant on Bells Lane. (The contractor for the job said vinyl-chloride fumes in the sewer line reached 48 parts per million — perhaps far more than the new federal standards for working conditions would allow.)

- Heard a report from its staff saying the law is not clear about whether MSD or the city of Louisville is responsible for storm-drainage problems in the city. At present, the report says, sewer customers who live outside the city are subsidizing storm-drainage programs for city residents.

- Approved a new regulation forbidding the connection of basement-floor drains to sanitary sewers — but allowing the connection of basement-sanitary drains if a special valve is used to keep the water from backing up into the basement if the sewer becomes overloaded.

Vinyl chloride

The vinyl-chloride fumes were discovered during the summer when workers dug into a large storm sewer to install a floodgate.

Vinyl chloride is a substance used in making plastics. It has been blamed for causing a rare form of cancer, angiosarcoma, which attacks the liver and has killed at least six former workers at the Goodrich plant here.

The sewer line, about 18 feet wide and 27 feet high, carries storm water overflow from a sewer pumping station near Bells Lane and 41st Street to the Ohio River. The Goodrich plant dumps treated waste water into the storm sewer below the

pumping station; this water flows directly to the river.

The floodgates are being installed in the large sewer line to keep Ohio River flood water from backing up into the pumping station.

Construction work was stopped in July after workers complained that noxious fumes often filled the sewer and made them sick. The fumes were traced to the line leading from the Goodrich plant.

The construction work was being done by Munich Engineering of Jeffersonville. James A. Munich, president of the company, said after the MSD meeting yesterday that he had had the fumes analyzed. One test, he said, showed 48 parts per million of vinyl chloride in the air in the sewer line.

(Earlier this month, Goodrich said it had tested the fumes; it reported it found "small concentrations" or "a trace" of vinyl chloride.)

Munich asked for an extension of his deadline for completing the job because of the delays caused by the fumes, and because of a delay in the manufacturer's delivery of the floodgates. He estimated the cost of the delay at \$71,000. (The original cost of the project was to be about \$400,000.)

J. C. Taylor, secretary-treasurer of MSD, told the board Goodrich had promised to cooperate in solving the problem, but had denied liability for paying for the delay.

He and R. W. Keats, the sewer district's attorney, said Munich or MSD probably would have to go to court to force Goodrich to pay for the delay.

The board granted Munich a delay in his deadline for completing the project — but did not act on his request for the extra money.

Storm drainage

The storm-drainage report was prepared after Mayor Harvey Sloane complained that citizens with drainage problems were "getting the run-around" from city departments and MSD.

The report says different state laws give the city and MSD powers to deal with storm drainage.

It also points out that MSD's main

source of income is money collected for sanitary-sewer service. Using this money to provide storm drainage in the city is not fair to the customers, it says.

In the areas of Jefferson County outside of Louisville, MSD builds and maintains storm drains under a contract with the county. Fiscal Court pays the cost of this program.

But in Louisville, MSD pays for the maintenance of combined storm and sanitary sewers and for many storm drains.

Since MSD customers outside the city pay the same rates as customers inside the city, the report says, "county residents are helping to pay for services provided in the city."

The board asked its staff to arrange meetings with city officials to try to work out a clear-cut storm-drainage program.

Basement drains

The new regulation on basement drains was proposed late last year after MSD customers complained water was backing up into their basements when it rained.

The hottest protests came from the Bon Air area, where sanitary sewage often backed up into finished basements.

MSD explained that local and federal regulations forbid storm water in sanitary sewers. The backups were being caused, MSD said, by forbidden waters.

In December, MSD proposed a new regulation that would stop the connection of any drain to a sanitary-sewer line if the drain would be below the level of the street (or the ground) over the sanitary-sewer line.

The board made a special point of forbidding basement floor drains, on the theory that storm water seeping through the basement walls could enter the sanitary sewers through these drains.

At a public hearing Aug. 20, representatives of the home-building industry expressed strong objections to parts of the proposal.

In the modified regulation approved yesterday, MSD will allow "sanitary sewage" connections — for kitchens, bathrooms and laundry areas — below ground level, but only if a special valve is installed to keep sewer water from backing up through the drains.