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U.S. to propose zero limit on exposure of plant employes to vinyl chloride

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WASHINGTON — The federal government Friday will formally propose stringent new measures to protect workers from exposure to vinyl chloride, a cancer-causing chemical that has killed at least nine workers.

The Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) will propose that "no detectable level" of vinyl chloride gas be permitted in work places where the chemical is used.

This latest in a series of government actions involving the vinyl chloride industry follows the disclosure earlier this year that angiosarcoma of the liver, a rare cancer, had been fatal to workers at the B. F. Goodrich Co.'s plant in Louisville.

Since that time, angiosarcoma has been identified as the cause of five fatalities at the plant. Other deaths and cases of the disease subsequently have been reported in other parts of the country.

Vinyl chloride (VC) is used in the production of thousands of plastic products,

ranging from hoses and phonograph records to fabrics and paints and pharmaceuticals. VC also is used as a propellant for some aerosol products.

The OSHA standards would apply directly to 51 plants in the United States, where more than 6,500 workers are involved either in production of vinyl chloride or in conversion of the chemical to polyvinyl chloride—of which more than 7 billion pounds was made last year.

Under the procedures to be announced Friday in the Federal Register, the detection of any vinyl chloride would automatically set off a series of work practices to guard against exposing workers to the fumes.

An OSHA spokesman said the agency anticipates initiating the new standard as early as July, after required procedural

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steps are followed—allowing comment and public hearings on the proposals.

Currently, the industry is regulated by standard that limits exposure to no more than 50 parts of vinyl chloride per million parts of air. That standard was set on an emergency basis last month after the Louisville fatalities were made public.

Previously, before vinyl chloride had been identified as a cancer-producing agent, OSHA had permitted 500 parts per million—a standard considered by some companies to be excessive. Goodrich has maintained that its Louisville plant has met a 50-parts standard voluntarily for some time.

Stronger standards sought

The Industrial Union Department (IUD) of the AFL-CIO has been sharply critical of OSHA's emergency-standard approach, arguing that the standard needed to be far more stringent.

Last week, Peter Bommarito, president of the United Rubber Workers, renewed his criticism of OSHA, saying that new evidence made a no-detectable-level standard more urgent on an emergency basis.

OSHA's 50 parts per million standard, which is also the standard adopted by Kentucky, will remain in effect until the

procedural steps are completed and the new, lower standard is formally put into effect.

The new evidence, to which Bommarito referred was a Manufacturing Chemists Association study that found mice exposed to the same levels now permitted for workers were developing the liver cancer.

OSHA declined to revise its emergency standard downward on the grounds that the new permanent proposals were about to be made and would go into effect within a matter of weeks.

Under the proposed permanent standard, these are some of the requirements that would be enforced by OSHA:

- ✓ The manufacture, use and handling of vinyl chloride would be limited to certain "regulated areas" and monitoring of those areas would be required to detect any measurable levels of the chemical and to determine individual worker exposure.

- ✓ Workers or their designated representatives would be permitted to observe the monitoring activity, and a respiratory protection program in the regulated area would go into effect when measurable amounts of vinyl chloride are found.

- ✓ Employers would have to provide protective clothing for employees in the

regulated areas and food and beverages would be banned from those areas.

- ✓ A program of annual medical examinations at no cost to the workers would take effect, and records would have to be maintained by the employer for the duration of employment plus five additional years — or 20 years, whichever is longer. An initial medical exam would be given each worker when the new standard takes effect.

- ✓ Employers would have to keep records of monitoring, the medical exams and a tabulation of entry into the regulated areas by employees.

OSHA also contemplates setting a date for requiring all employers to report the location of every operation with one or more regulated area and other pertinent data.

The agency proposal also calls for requiring employers to report to OSHA within 24 hours any incident involving the release of vinyl chloride in any area where workers are exposed. More detailed written reports would be required within 15 days.

Under the procedures for establishing the new standard, OSHA will accept written comments on the proposals or receive requests for a public hearing on them until June 10.