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E.P.A. Proposes Allowing Emissions of Cancer-Causing Substance

By PHILIP SHABECOFF

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 23 — The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed changing its rules to allow some controlled air emissions of vinyl chloride, a cancer-causing substance. The agency said it was planning the changes to make the rules easier to enforce and therefore more likely to protect health.

Under current rules, discharges of vinyl chloride into the air are prohibited except in "emergencies" that are not preventable by the producing plant. If emissions can be prevented, they are not considered emergencies and are subject to penalties.

The agency has proposed that instead of prohibiting all but emergency releases, plants making vinyl chloride be permitted a certain number of discharges of the substances each year. The number of permissible emissions would range from four to seven, depending on the size and location of the

plant. The rules changes would set no limit on the amount of the individual discharges.

'Aggressive Enforcement'

Charles L. Elkins, the environmental agency's acting assistant administrator for air and radiation, said that the change was being proposed "so we can have an efficient, aggressive enforcement program without having to look at every single incident" involving the discharge of vinyl chloride. Now, each time there is such an incident, the staff of the environmental agency must investigate to determine whether or not it was an emergency.

According to E.P.A. figures, nearly a million pounds of vinyl chloride was discharged into the air from 1977 to 1980. According to an agency official in the office that prepared the proposed changes, who asked not to be identified, none of the discharges were a result of an emergency and they were accidental. Fines have been levied for the re-

leases, but the law also permits criminal penalties.

The proposed rules changes were published in the Federal Register in January and the comment period ended Monday. Final proposed rules must be issued and comments must be taken before any charges are put into effect.

Critics, including environmentalists and the environmental agency official said today that the changes would permit more vinyl chloride pollution of the air and thus increase the threat of cancer to people in the vicinity of plants.

Vinyl chloride, which is used in the manufacture of plastics and other materials, has been found to cause brain and liver cancer in humans and is currently one of five toxic air pollutants regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

There are about 50 plants producing vinyl chloride around the country, including five in New Jersey and one in Niagara Falls, N.Y., according to

E.P.A. data.

David D. Doniger, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, said the proposed rule changes meant that the environmental agency, as a matter of policy, would permit discharges of a known cancer-causing substance into the air, even though "the best scientific evidence is that there is no safe level of exposure for any carcinogen."

'Screw Down on Emissions'

"If the Bhopal accident and all the new information about releases in New Jersey and elsewhere have shown anything this winter, it is that the E.P.A. has to screw down on emissions of toxic air pollutants, not ease controls," Mr. Doniger said.

The official in the E.P.A. office that prepared the changes said that the current rules did take up a considerable amount of time and money to enforce and that the changes would free resources to concentrate on a variety of other enforcement actions.

But the official said that if the changes were adopted, "There will definitely be more vinyl chloride in the air and we will be able to take much fewer enforcement actions."

"This is not sinister," the official said, "but it just so happens the effect is a loosening of the regulations."

Mr. Elkins said that in view of the criticism he had asked the agency's office of air quality standard to take another look at the proposed change "to make sure it is the best we can come up with."

Efforts to reach officials of the Vinyl Institute, the industry group that represents manufacturers of the subject, were unsuccessful. The institute's public affairs official said that the executives who could comment were traveling and could not be reached. The agency official said that the institute supported the rules changes.

Test Diagnoses Muscular Disease in Fetuses

By The Associated Press

The first reliable test for the most common kind of muscular dystrophy can diagnose the disease in a fetus as early as the eighth week of pregnancy and identify mothers who are carriers, a new study says.

The disease, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, afflicts 50,000 to 100,000 American boys and young men who will not survive beyond their 20's, according to the Muscular Dystrophy Association in New York.

Egbert Bakker, one of the test's developers, puts its accuracy at 99 percent and says it can be used in 95 percent of families in which the illness has appeared.

Mr. Bakker, of the Department of Human Genetics at the State University in Leiden, The Netherlands, is one of 16 doctors and scientists from five countries who are reporting the devel-

The test relies on the determination of a genetic "fingerprint" characteristic of each family.

In many families this fingerprint will be found only in males with muscular dystrophy and in female carriers. It is produced by normal genetic variations called restriction fragment length polymorphisms.

Entire families including a member with muscular dystrophy must be tested to find the fingerprint. Genetic material is extracted from the blood and analyzed.

In a fetus, doctors can obtain a genetic sample using amniocentesis or the newer procedure of chorionic biopsy.

In a matter of months, researchers expect to isolate the precise gene that is defective in muscular dystrophy. Then the test will be accurate 100 per-

cent.

One-third of muscular dystrophy cases come from genetic mutations in individuals who have no family history of the disease, a researcher said.

The normal route of inheritance of Duchenne muscular dystrophy is through mothers who are carriers, but have no signs of the disease.

The sons of carrier-mothers have a 50 percent chance of having the disease and half of a carrier's daughters will themselves be carriers.

Duchenne muscular dystrophy is the most rapidly progressing and one of the most common forms of muscular dystrophy.

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