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Cleaning up spilled chemicals

Hazardous materials. Mainly by land and water more than 900 chemical items of commerce are transported. They present a hazard because occasionally these materials are spilled. This year alone some 1400 such spills occurred—on the average, about four a day—about 10% of the total 14,000 spills annually, the majority of which are oil spills.

Spills make headlines. Louisville, Ky.—in March 1972, a barge carrying some 640 tons of poisonous chlorine gas in cylinders got caught up in a dam on the Ohio River (see cover photo). Although the cylinders never ruptured, more than 4500 residents were evacuated. Seattle, Wash.—on Sept. 13, 1974, more than 200 gal of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), one of the most toxic materials known, spilled from a leaking electric transformer into the Duwamish River in the Seattle harbor. EPA removed most of the glob of material from the bottom of the harbor.

When inland spills occur, cleanup is guided and usually coordinated by the Environmental Protection Agency under the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan. The agency is unique for this cleanup assignment. It has a computerized on-line OHM-TADS, the oil and hazardous materials technical assistance data system. More than 120 answers to possible questions for each of the materials are readily available within minutes to help the agency coordinate cleanup.

With a dozen professionals at headquarters in Washington, D.C., and five cleanup pros in each of its 10 regions—although they are mainly oil cleanup experts—the agency sorely needs a training program on hazardous materials. Its goal is to have 20 hazardous materials cleanup pros, two for each region, in the near future.

Another dilemma with hazardous materials is that no funds are available for their cleanup in the \$20 million national contingency plan funds. And the funds won't be available until the agency designates and promulgates its list of hazardous materials, which is expected by June 30, 1975.

Nevertheless, other countries are looking to U.S. initiative in hazardous materials cleanup. Canada is accessing OHM-TADS and making it the basis of that country's spill response program. Sweden has asked to access the computer and to have the information transmitted by transoceanic cable.

Stanton S. Miller