Vinyl-Chloride Emissions Would Be Cut 90% Under Standard Proposed by EPA

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL *Staff Reporter*

WASHINGTON--Declaring that a health risk exists for 4.6 million people living near vinyl-chloride plants, the government proposed requiring a 90% cut in air emissions of the cancer-linked chemical.

The standard proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency would require that the 60 or so existing manufacturers of vinyl chloride and two sister compounds, ethylene dichloride and polyvinyl chloride, install "best available" technology to limit emissions from their plants. Concentrations of the chemicals in air around the plants currently average less than one part per million, the EPA said. The new standard would reduce that level to about 0.1 part per million.

Vinyl-chloride gas is used primarily in the plastics industry to make polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, a plastic that is widely used in consumer products and construction. It has been under intense scrutiny, spurred in part by a B. F. Goodrich Co. unit report in January 1974 that several of its employes had died from a rare liver cancer linked to exposures to the gas.

EPA Administrator Russell Train said that his agency doesn't know precisely what level is low enough to eliminate any cancer risk but that he hopes the proposed standard will reduce most of the cancer cases traced to the substance. From one to 20 cases of cancer each year are attributable to vicinity exposure to vinyl chloride, he said.

Cost to Manufacturers

Mr. Train said that meeting the new standard would cost manufacturers about $198 million plus another $70 million each year to maintain the required emission levels.

That cost, he said, could force four small plants, or 0.5% of the industry, to close. These facilities, according to the EPA, are Occidental Petroleum Corp.'s polyvinyl-chloride plant in Hicksville, N.Y., and three Jannet Corp. polyvinyl-chloride plants in Torrance, Calif.; Tucker, Ga., and Somerset, N.J. The plants employ a total of 30 workers.

Mr. Train said the agency considered requiring that emissions be eliminated entirely but feared that such a stringent standard would effectively close the entire industry. Because the lapse between exposure to vinyl chloride and the appearance of cancer may be as much as 20 years, Mr. Train said the EPA couldn't ignore the growing public exposure to the gas. Vinyl-chloride production is up about 90% from 15 to 20 years ago.

Workers' Exposure Reduced

In October 1974, after months of fact-finding and hearings marked by bitter controversy, the Labor Department ordered a cut in worker exposure to vinyl chloride within the plant to one part per million from the previously allowed 50 parts per million. Industry officials had warned that the rule was so harsh it could lead to a total closedown of plants making PVC plastic vinyl-chloride gas.

So far, however, only Uniroyal Inc. has announced plans to close a plant rather than meet the worker-exposure standards. It plans to close its Painesville, Ohio, PVC resins plant by March 1.

The new EPA standard won't be adopted formally until after a 45-day period for public comment and a public hearing. Mr. Train said he hopes to complete the process by late spring. Manufacturing plants would then have 90 days to install the emission-control equipment or to apply for an extension. The agency could grant extensions of up to two years.

Industry spokesmen agreed on the need to restrict plant emissions of vinyl-chloride gas but at the same time denied there was any known risk from such leaks into the atmosphere.

"In the Public Interest"

"We don't believe that there is any current, nor has there been any past, risk to the health of individuals residing in the proximity of vinyl-chloride gas and polyvinyl-chloride-resin plants, but the VCM-PVC producers agree that rigorous emission controls are in the public interest," said Ralph L. Harding Jr., president of the Society of the Plastics Industry Inc.

The society represents makers of 99% of the vinyl-chloride-monomer and polyvinyl-chloride plastic made in the U.S. Mr. Harding said his group views the EPA's action as "primarily a precautionary step." But he noted that the EPA's proposed standard hasn't been studied in detail by industry representatives and that further comment will be made within the normal rule-making procedures preceding imposition of the requirement.

A spokesman for B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co., a unit of B. F. Goodrich Co., said in Akron, Ohio, "We recognize that there is a need for control requirements and emission limitations." He said the company expects to be able to meet the requirements, even though untried technology would have to be developed to do it.

Poses No Overriding Problem

Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., another major maker, said the proposed standard is attainable "and poses no overriding problem for Goodyear, which already is well along the way to meeting it." A spokesman said in Akron that the company expects to make "rather substantial" capital expenditures to meet the standard and that "regrettably, these additional costs ultimately will be reflected in product costs."

Both companies declined to estimate the cost to them of meeting the EPA regulation.

Tenneco Inc. said in Houston that it is currently in compliance with some sections of the proposed regulation and would be able to meet the rest within the EPA's time limits.