

EPA HOLDS PCB SYMPOSIUM FOR SCIENTISTS, BUT STATUS OF PROCEEDINGS ARE NOT OFFICIAL

Has the Environmental Protection Agency opened up a loophole for an industry-backed move to declare that there is no danger from exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) or has it provided scientists with a convenient forum to exchange data on PCB health effects? Facing a court-ordered August deadline for completion of a final rule, EPA gathered scientists together May 12-13 for an \$85-a-head "public" meeting on the issue, although agency officials insist that the symposium had nothing to do with the PCB rulemaking now in progress.

Presenters of scientific abstracts were instructed not to discuss the PCB proposal issued last month, EPA's Joe Handy told TMN, and in fact, they must make another submission during the public hearing which begins June 7 for their data to be included in the final rulemaking.

The meeting, for which EPA paid its contractor Life Systems, Inc. more than \$80,000 to organize, was needed "to create a dialogue among scientists," Handy said, which could not have occurred during a normal public hearing. He also claimed that it would have cost EPA nearly the same amount of money in staff time to hold a free meeting at the agency instead of charging attendance and holding the meeting at a hotel and providing lunches and refreshments.

One industry official involved with a firm making PCB substitutes called the meeting a "set up" however, a view echoed by Jackie Warren of the Natural Resources Defense Council. EPA loaded the meeting with pro-industry views, she told TMN, although Handy claimed that the fact that most of the research was sponsored by industry "does not impute badly" on the presenters' scientific credentials. Claiming that the last-minute meeting "smacks of back-room" dealings, Warren threatened a lawsuit if EPA attempts to use the data presented during the meeting and characterized the symposium as "obviously an effort to pad" the evidence on PCBs.

Industry Minimizes Dangers of PCB Exposure

Dr. William R. Gaffey of Monsanto presented findings which he said "do not provide the consistent, exposure-related results that would justify concluding that PCBs are carcinogenic in human beings." Although conceding that the substance can cause temporary skin disorders, he said that studies have failed to find a link between disease and populations which are non-occupationally exposed.

The Chemical Manufacturers Association characterized PCBs as "not the unique health hazard they once were thought to be" and CMA's Dr. Geraldine Cox issued a statement that "the data on PCBs offers no justification for lowering the current regulatory cut-off of 50 parts per million." CMA also said that new studies found no significant chronic effects in workers with long-term exposure to PCBs.

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SCHWEIKER BACKPEDDLES ON PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT CANCER ESTIMATES

The government is now trying to distance itself from estimates made in 1978 that 20% of all U.S. cancers are due to workplace exposures. That estimate came from then Secretary of the Health, Education and Welfare Department, Joseph Califano, who noted that the lion's share of that 20% was due to asbestos exposure. However, in a letter to Bob Pigg, executive director of the Asbestos Information Association, Health and Human Services Secretary Richard Schweiker now claims that "most recent estimates imply that the original estimates of cancer associated with asbestos exposure were too high."

Schweiker said that the estimates on which Califano based his claim were never peer reviewed or published in scientific literature. "Current estimates for overall workplace-associated cancer mortality vary within a range of five to fifteen percent," Schweiker told the asbestos industry group. "Recent estimates for the contribution of asbestos to cancer mortality range from one to three percent," he added. The letter from the Cabinet official explained that Califano's estimates were taken from a paper submitted to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration by the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. "It is my understanding that the paper was not intended to be a statement of departmental policy," Schweiker said in the letter.