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Vinyl Chloride Final Standard Stirs Protests

PVC Industry Fears Tough OSHA Stand Spells Doom

By RPN Washington News Bureau

WASHINGTON—The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued its anxiously awaited final standard for worker exposure to vinyl chloride on Oct. 4, and while the result wasn't the "no detectable" limit originally proposed by the agency, it was tough enough to raise a storm of industry protest—and at best faint praise from labor.

Within a few minutes of the standards' announcement, the Society of the Plastics Industry filed a petition for review of the standards in the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York.

Additional lawsuits followed in rapid succession. Hooker and Union Carbide filed similar suits in the New York Court, while Tenneco and Air Products filed in the Third Circuit Court and Firestone in the Sixth. B.F. Goodrich is expected to follow suit.

THE TOUGH new standard that has stirred such vehement opposition will require industry to reduce vinyl chloride concentration in air to no more than one part per million parts of air (ppm) over any eight-hour period and no more than five ppm over any period no longer than 15 minutes. OSHA has established a three-phase schedule for plants and factories to meet the standards.

Perhaps the most vehement rejection of the standard came from Todd C. Walker, president of the Firestone Plastics Co. Walker charged that the new standard "puts the vinyl plastics industry on a collision course with economic disaster."

Walker cited an economic impact study made earlier this year by the Arthur D. Little Co., based on an initial proposed standard similar to the final permanent standard issued October 4. According to the Little study, Walker said, a standard as tough as the one now going into effect would cause the loss of some 2 million industry jobs.

"This [Little] study and other medical, scientific and engineering data submitted by the industry and by individual companies in response to OSHA's request," Walker said, "appear to have been completely ignored in establishing the standard."

THE RESULT, said Walker, is a standard that is "economically unrealistic, technically unfeasible, politically motivated and medically ridiculous." It is comparable, he said, "to a law aimed at stopping automobile deaths by lowering the speed limit to one mile per hour."

Firestone, Walker said, would initiate "necessary legal steps" to challenge the new standard.

Spokesmen for Goodyear, meanwhile, declined to comment on the substance of the standard, indicating only that the company would take the necessary steps to try to comply. And, at least one firm, Robintech Inc., indicated that only minor alterations would be required to comply with the standard.

In posting the permanent standard, OSHA officials acknowledged the difficulty some segments of the industry would have in achieving compliance.

"There is little dispute that VC [vinyl chloride] is carcinogenic [cancer-causing] to man and we so conclude," said OSHA Chief John H. Stender.

"However," Stender added, "the precise level of exposure which poses a hazard and the question of whether a 'safe' exposure level exists cannot be definitively answered on the record. Nor is it clear to what extent exposures can be feasibly reduced."

But, Stender emphasized, OSHA "cannot wait until undisputable answers to these questions are available... lives of employees are at stake."

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ACCORDINGLY, he said, "on the basis of the best available evidence," OSHA has judged that the exposure limit must be reduced to 1 ppm on a "time-weighted average [TWA]" to protect workers.

"We also believe," Stender concluded, "that PVC [polyvinyl chloride] and VC establishments will, in time, be able to attain that level through engineering controls, and that fabricators can do so in the immediate future."

Noting that the standard will apply to the entire VC industry, including manufacturers of vinyl chloride monomer (normally a gas) and polyvinyl chloride polymer (normally a resin compound used in a number of plastic materials) and fabricators of plastics products using VC and PVC (employers who use or handle finished fabricated products are exempt). OSHA officials summarized key provisions of the standard as follows:

- Employers must set up "regulated areas" where concentrations of VCM (vinyl chloride monomer) exceed the "one and five ppm" limits, with access limited to "authorized" workers.

- Plans for reducing exposure to the permissible "one and five ppm" levels must be available on request of OSHA.

- Direct contact by employees with liquid VCM is prohibited.

- Monitoring and measuring programs must be initiated to learn whether exposure levels exceed 0.5 ppm. Depending on levels found, repeat measurements are required at least monthly or quarterly. They may be discontinued only when two consecutive measurements, no fewer than five working days apart, show individual employee exposures to be less than 0.5 ppm.

- Monitoring and measuring methods must meet accuracy requirements ranging from not less than $\pm 50\%$ in concentrations from 0.25 through 0.5 ppm, to $\pm 25\%$ for levels greater than one ppm.

- Where the regular monitoring program shows excursion levels may exceed 25 ppm, a continuous monitoring and alarm system must be used to alert em-

ployees to potential danger if they are using air filtering respirators (gas masks). At that level they must switch to respirators with a clean air supply.

- Protective garments as well as respiratory protection must be provided for employees in hazardous situations, such as cleaning operations in PVC vessels.

- Medical programs must include complete initial examinations. Subsequent ones will be required every six months for employees who have worked in VCM or PVC operations for 10 or more years, and annually for all other exposed workers. Alternative medical examinations will be acceptable if the examining physician states his procedures and reasons for substitution. All medical checks are at no cost to employees.

- Specified signs or labels are required at entrances to "regulated areas," in hazardous operations or emergency areas, on containers of PVC resin waste, PVC containers and VCM containers.

- Records of required monitoring and measuring, medical records, and rosters of "authorized" workers must be kept for varying specified times, or be sent to the Director, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, if an employer ceases to do business before the expiration of retention periods.

- Reports must be made to the nearest OSHA Area Director no later than one month after establishing a "regulated area," and within 24 hours of any "emergency" exposure. Also, reports to affected employees must be made within 10 days after monitoring and measuring shows exposure in excess of the "one and five ppm" limits, including the results of the measurements and steps being taken to reduce exposure to permissible levels.

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