

EPA soil test shows no dioxin threat

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Testing completed in Midland to date indicates dioxin levels in area soils are not a human health threat, four officials of the Environmental Protection Agency said Monday.

In a meeting with local officials, the EPA said it believes tests completed by the Dow Chemical Co. are reliable and show dioxin in soils to be well below the concern level issued by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. But at the same time, the EPA said it will continue its testing of dioxins in Midland's soil, air and water for comparison and "scientific reasons."

The EPA announcement was a change in position from what the agency previously said about Midland, a Dow spokeswoman said.

EPA officials Michael Cook, Gary Amendola, David Stringham and Barry Korb were in Midland for a follow-up to a November meeting in Washington. The local officials were concerned the EPA was singling out Midland in its study of dioxin contamination and had asked for several provisions they said would allow the city to be equally compared to other areas of the country. Rep. Donald Albosta, D-St. Charles, also attended the session.

What started out as a continuation of the Washington conversation turned into a surprise announcement for the local officials, though.

"What you are telling us for the first time, if the Dow information is substantiated, is Midland doesn't have a dioxin problem," Philip Van Dam, former president of the Chamber of Commerce, said.

"The data, at least from Dow, indicate the level is not high enough to be a concern to public health," Cook said.

Meeting's 'guest list' draws objection

Environmental Protection Agency officials were in Midland Monday to discuss dioxin contamination in the city, but their visit also sparked controversy about the guest list for the meeting.

Rep. Donald Albosta, D-St. Charles, scheduled a session between the EPA and local officials as a follow-up to a November meeting in Washington. Because of what officials said was a lengthy agenda and limited seating space, the session was not opened to the general public.

Diane Hebert, director of the Environmental Congress of Mid-Michigan, objected to that ar-

range, however, and so late Friday Albosta scheduled a public question and answer session Monday after the first meeting.

Mrs. Hebert objected to the last-minute scheduling of it, though, because she said it did not give the public time to be notified. She accused Albosta of representing only part of his constituency, a charge which drew heated response from the congressman.

"We went out of our way to set up another meeting so you could participate and take advantage of the EPA being in town," Albosta said. "You're being unfair to me. If the meeting was scheduled on short no-

tice, it seems to me you have some responsibility to get on the phone and call people about it."

Midland Mayor Joseph Mamm said Mrs. Hebert had some justification for her complaint, but said he believes Albosta had tried to be fair to all sides. He added ECOMM has conducted meetings in the past and denied other parties access.

"They had a meeting in June and strangely the press and others were denied access," he said. "Five members of the EPA flew into town and met with ECOMM and left without even contacting local officials. Then ECOMM held a press conference after it was over."

In the time since EPA and local officials met in Washington, Cook said, the Centers for Disease Control announced that dioxin in residential area soil is not believed to be a concern to public health unless it is at a level of at least 1 part per billion. Dow studies put the level at 7 parts per trillion, considerably lower than the CDC advisory, Cook said.

The Centers for Disease Control is part of the federal Health and Human Services Department.

Although the EPA has taken soil samples inside the Dow plant and in the city for analysis, Amendola, project manager for the Michigan dioxin study, said he "has no reason to believe at all" that Dow's results are inaccurate.

The Centers for Disease Control has not set specific limits for dioxin levels in commercial, industrial or agricultural areas, Cook said, but added that they are higher than the residential level.

Local officials and Dow heralded EPA's announcement as good news for Midland residents.

"The last official word from the EPA was that Midland was the number one concern," Dow spokeswoman Sarah Rowley said. "So this meeting clarified the perspective in which the concern should be treated."

Rowley said Dow did six soil samples in residential areas in the past six

months and did others periodically before that.

"All our community samplings were well below one part per billion," she said.

"I wasn't as much surprised (about the announcement) as I was relieved," Albosta said after the meeting. "That's the best kind of news Midland can get."

"That's a major development," Chamber of Commerce director William Welch said. "And I think it's the result of our pressing (for meetings with the EPA). We wouldn't have gotten this information if we hadn't kept pressing."

EPA's announcement eased some concern that Midland would gain a

national reputation as a dioxin hotbed, but officials breathed another sigh of relief when they reviewed dioxin studies from other areas of the country.

EPA released a list of 16 sites which have received some dioxin testing. Based on the information provided by Dow, it indicates several cities have higher levels of dioxin contamination.

"The information so far seems to indicate Midland is a whole lot lower than other levels," Amendola said.

"If you are concerned about whether other sites have dioxin, we've shown you there are lots of sites that have dioxin," Cook added.

Amendola and Cook said the EPA plans to continue its analysis of soil samples taken at Dow and in Midland last summer and fall for primarily scientific reasons. Although results were expected by March, Amendola said analysis of the samples probably won't be completed until mid-June.

The delay is due to the EPA's current efforts to determine which analytical method to use in testing the soils, Amendola said.

EPA's findings will be compared to those of Dow, Amendola said, but the agency's prime purpose now is to fine tune its analytical methods and try to determine dioxin discharge limits for nationwide use. Albosta approved of that strategy.

"The EPA tests could be beneficial to Dow," he said. "They have to establish levels and keep them nationwide and if Dow is already at those levels, other companies that are above them will have to do a little more changing (of systems) than Dow. This could be the feedstock company of the future. If I was going to buy stock, I think out of any chemical company I would buy Dow."