DANVILLE, ILL.
COMMERCIAL-NEWS
D. 36,000 S. 36,000

JAN 24 1976

Institute official labels environment as cancer cause

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Gannett News Service

Last of three articles

Washington — If, as the head of the National Cancer Institute has estimated, up to 90 per cent of human cancers are caused by something in the environment, the solution seems obvious: Eliminate those things from the environment.

Take Salem County, N.J., the bladder cancer capital of the United States. The reason men there get bladder cancer at a far greater rate than those in most other areas is not in doubt. About one-quarter of them work in chemical industries where they are exposed to 2-napthylamine and other substances.

Can one responsibly propose that the plants be shut down? A few people would go that far. Most would probably say that the answer is to improve the plants and their processes so that, if such dangerous cancer-causing substances have to be used, workers are protected from them.

This brings one to a key element of the problem of environmentally - caused cancer: If it can be eliminated, what will that cost? Is any cost low for saving human life and misery? The humanitarian answer is yes. Industry's answer is, frequently, an equivocal one.

There is a bill, the Toxic Substances Control Act, that will be taken up in Congress early this year, probably first in the House of Representatives. There probably will be little debate about the desirability of keeping poisonous and cancer-causing substances out of the earth, the water and the air. The argument is going to be about how much it would cost government to carry out the law and how much it would cost industry to comply with it.

The Environmental Protection Agency has made one estimate: At least $79 million a year and perhaps $141.5 million. Dow Chemical U.S.A. has made another — $2 billion. The Manufacturing Chemists Association says it could be from $360 million to $1.3 billion a year.

Congress's General Accounting Office says it thinks all these studies are questionable, and that the Dow figures especially are far too high. Considering the benefits to society, the GAO said, whatever the cost might be, the benefits might be worth it.

Probably the cost will be higher than the EPA's high figure and lower than the industry figures, the GAO said, guessing it will be around $241 to $341 million a year.

Considering that the industries that would be most affected had 1974 after-tax profits of $5.5 billion, this is not excessive, in the opinion of the House Environmental Study Conference, a group of more than 100 congressmen who form the hard core of environmental votes in the House.

What the law would do is require that firms report to the government whenever they plan to produce a new chemical substance. Some of these would be tested, some would not — there would be a screening process. Depending on the results, some chemicals would be banned and the use of others restricted.

It is a modest beginning. Many existing chemicals would be unaffected. Some of those that pass the tests might turn out to be dangerous — like PCBs, which were only discovered to be hazardous after minute amounts, escaping from a number of sources, built up in the environment to a poisonous level.

Ideally, every one of the hundreds of thousands of substances invented and put on the market each year should be tested for its carcinogenicity— its cancer-causing potential.

Such tests, carried out with laboratory animals, can take from a year-and-a- half to three years and cost more than $100,000. Faster, cheaper tests are needed that could red-flag those substances likeliest to be dangerous. Without them, the whole project is impossible, scientists say.

So the Toxic Substances Act exempts most chemicals already on the market, unless they are found to be possibly dangerous. It limits testing of new chemicals to those which "may cause or contribute to an unreasonable risk to health", and for which there is no data or experience to predict their effect.

This is by no means enough to satisfy the Ralph Nader forces, or indeed many of the members of the House Environmental Study Conference. But it is a start and, considering the stiff industry opposition to the bill that is already surfacing, it is quite likely to be the most that can be hoped for at present.

MONS 032929