

Hazardous wastes: the European connection

The chaotic situation in the world of toxic waste disposal takes another grotesque turn this week with the revelation that Britain is actually importing from abroad significant volumes of hazardous industrial waste. An ME investigation shows that roughly one-quarter of the cyanide wastes treated in the GLC area during 1973 originated from continental Europe; of the total 500 tons of waste polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) currently incinerated in the UK each year, about a fifth is brought in from other countries.

The Department of the Environment has advised the chemical industry that there are no restrictions on the import of waste materials for disposal in the UK: the Department of Trade confirms that it requires no licences for such imports. The Customs and Excise Department could this week offer no information on the tariffs (if any) imposed on chemical wastes.

The GLC, which seems to have monitored this problem more closely than any other agency, regards it as one of particular concern. David Mills, head of the poisonous waste unit, has records which show that Redland Purle treated 49 tons of Swedish cyanide at its Rainham plant in 1973, out of a total of 220 tons notified to County Hall during the year. Last year the company notified the GLC of its intention to treat a further 30 tons from the same source, but the consignment was never actually accepted.

The PCB situation is more complex. The major UK manufacturer of PCBs — widely used as an insulating medium in the electrical manufacturing industry — is Monsanto Ltd., which evidently regards it as a duty to oversee disposal of this persistent organic substance when it becomes a waste. This means that the company ships back about ten tons a month of PCB waste fluids from the Continent to its Newport manufacturing plant: there it is bulked and (according to Monsanto) routed by Redland Purle via Rainham to Ellesmere Port for incineration. Over the last 18 months, the company says, Redland Purle has thus disposed of between 200-300 tons of PCB fluids which became waste outside the UK.

Redland Purle says that this contract has now lapsed and that, while in the past the company has made direct imports of toxic waste for disposal in the UK and accepted wastes imported by other companies, its policy is now to discontinue this practice. Nevertheless, while Monsanto is reported to be considering the use of Re-Chem's new disposal facilities in Pontypool it is continuing to use Redland Purle for the disposal of foreign PCB wastes on an

order-by-order basis.

The GLC has notifications for 80 tons of PCB wastes — from all sources, home and abroad — destroyed at Rainham in 1972, for 229 tons in 1973 and 362 tons last year. Redland Purle volunteered the information to County Hall that between August 1972 and October 1973 it incinerated 362 tons of waste PCB material.

Monsanto said this week that there were two main reasons for 're-importing' PCB wastes for disposal by Redland Purle. As the original manufacturer it had a responsibility to see that final disposal was effective (and after investigating Ellesmere Port it had approved Purle 'as an operator of the highest standard'). Secondly, although there were similar disposal facilities abroad, many were exclusively contracted to Monsanto's competitors in PCB manufacture. In future it would be putting its foreign customers directly in touch with the British waste disposal contractors, as soon as it was satisfied that their disposal facilities met its standards.

For Re-Chem, Dr Arthur Coleman said that the company had enough PCBs in its hands from UK arisings without getting any extra from abroad. In the last few months there had been many inquiries from foreign sources — even one on disposal of cyanide to be imported from Israel — but the wastes had never actually been sent to his company.

● See Comment, page 700 and also, unknown quantities in tankers, page 702

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