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THE TRACE CHEMISTRIES OF FIRE: HYPOTHESIS, REVIEW AND UPDATE

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Chlorinated dibenzodioxins (PCDDs) and dibenzofurans (PCDFs) were first discovered by Olie et al.⁶⁵ to be on fly ash from municipal incinerators in The Netherlands. Shortly thereafter, Buser et al.^{10,11} reported that these compounds were also present on particulate matter from a municipal incinerator and an industrial heating facility in Switzerland.

By the end of 1978, scientists from a Dow Chemical Company Chlorinated Dioxin Task Force⁷⁹ announced that chlorodibenzodioxins were present in all particulate matter taken inside or close to combustion facilities. The dioxins were found to be present in fly ash from municipal and industrial incinerators and an oil-fired powerhouse; dust from the cities of Midland, Detroit, Lansing, Chicago, and St. Louis; soil from Midland, Detroit, Lansing, Chicago, and Gaylord, Michigan; commercial sludge fertilizer from Milwaukee; particulate deposits from inside automobile and truck mufflers, both diesel and gasoline; soot from home fireplaces; and smoke from cigarettes. These findings together with those earlier reported by Olie⁶⁵ and Buser¹⁰ lead to the formulation of an hypothesis called "trace chemistries of fire". This hypothesis was described in the original report, and in more recent papers by Bumb^{4,5}, Crummett¹⁷, and the National Research Council Canada⁵⁹.

The trace chemistries of fire hypothesis simply says that numerous chemical reactions occur during combustion. These reactions produce numerous products, some of which are at very low concentration (parts per million or less) and are emitted in smoke or are retained in the ash. Among such trace products are the well known polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons as reported by the National Academy of Sciences.¹⁶ The trace chemistries of fire hypothesis^{5,17,79} includes chlorinated aromatic compounds among such products - particularly chlorinated dibenzodioxins, chlorinated dibenzofurans, and polychlorinated bi- and terphenyls. The concentration of the trace products is expected to vary with the (1) molecular structure of fuel, (2) chlorine content of fuel, (3) presence of precursors and contaminants in fuel, (4) reaction temperature within the combustion zone and post combustion zone, (5) residence time of reactants and intermediate products in the high temperature zone, (6)

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mixing efficiency of air with fuel, (7) air-fuel ratio, and (8) fuel feed size according to Shih et al.⁷⁶ The nature and concentration of the products can also be affected by the metals in the fly ash acting as catalysts.

The hypothesis as originally presented was based on the following facts:

- (1) Combustion processes are seldom more than 99.9 percent efficient in converting the carbon content of fuel to carbon dioxide.²⁰
- (2) The remaining 0.1 percent of the carbon in the fuel is converted to a large number of trace organic compounds including chlorinated hydrocarbons, only a few of which have been identified.^{21,45,48,68} Only a tiny fraction of this remainder need be converted to dioxins to account for the trace quantities of dioxins observed in combustion.
- (3) Refuse and fossil fuels are extremely complex mixtures of many chemicals and compounds, some of which are present at low concentrations.
- (4) The natural chlorine content of fuels ranges from one to five thousand parts per million.⁵⁸ This is much more chlorine than necessary to create chlorinated dioxins observed in combustion products.
- (5) Particles emitted from oil-fired heating and power plants contain vanadium and nickel.⁴⁹ Those emitted from coal-fired boilers contain vanadium, nickel, iron, and manganese.⁴³ These transition metals together with silicon and unoxidized carbon can serve as catalysts in the combustion process.
- (6) Chemical reactions which are known to occur in flames include pyrolysis, oxidation, reduction, and acidolysis. Ions, electrons, free radicals, and free atoms interact in a continuously changing environment.
- (7) In the Sumb study^{5,17}, chlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins were found in all particulate matter taken from areas close to combustion processes.
- (8) Precursors for the formation of chlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins have been convincingly demonstrated to include chlorinated phenols⁶⁹ and chlorobenzenes.⁶

Since polyvinyl chloride produces chlorobenzenes^{35,67} during pyrolysis, its role as a precursor is also suspect.

Since the "trace chemistries of the hypothesis" was presented, many studies have been made which test the hypothesis. These may be placed in several categories as follows:

(1) Studies of the combustion products of incinerators. Lustenhou-er et al⁵⁵ reviewed the literature and reported that PCDDs and PCDFs were found in fly ash from all thirty-five municipal incinerators examined by all investigators. These include data on nine incinerators in The Netherlands as reported by Olie et al⁶⁶. Cavallaro et al^{12,13} found similar distributions of PCDDs and PCDFs in fly ash from each of six Italian municipal incinerators examined; Eiceman et al²⁶ reported finding a variety of chlorinated organic compounds including PCDDs, and PCDFs, in fly ash from municipal incinerators in Canada, Japan, and The Netherlands. Also in Canada, Wang et al⁸⁶ and Chiu et al¹⁴ reported PCDDs and PCDFs were present in the effluent from two municipal incinerators. Samuelson and Lindskog⁷⁴ and Eklund and Stromberg²² found PCDDs and PCDFs in fly ash from Swedish municipal incinerators. Rappe⁷¹ and Buser^{8,9} found PCDDs and PCDFs in fly ash samples from municipal incinerators in Switzerland. Janssens et al³⁶ found them in Belgium. In Italy these compounds were found in emissions from urban incinerators by Liberti et al^{50,51} in Milan, Bologna, Florence, and Rome and by Marselli et al⁵⁷ in Bologna. Gizza et al²⁹ studied the variability in PCDD and PCDF content of emissions from an Italian urban incinerator. Karasek et al^{27,40} reported on a municipal incinerator in France and compared it with one in Ontario, Canada. In the United States Redford et al⁷² and Tiernan et al⁸¹ found PCDDs in municipal incinerator effluent. Tiernan⁸¹ also found PCDDs in extracts of effluents from a Hempstead, New York incinerator. In Germany Ballschmitter et al² used OCDD as a PCDD indicator and found it in five of six municipal incinerators. These compounds were also found by Buser et al^{7,9} in fly ash from an industrial incinerator and Hrybarczuk et al³³ found the tetra isomers in fly ash from a wire reclamation incinerator. The fact that PCDDs have been found in all municipal incinerators thus far examined, supports the conclusion that this is a general phenomenon.

(2) Studies on the combustion products of wood. Ahling and Lindskog¹ reported that pyrolysis of wood or paper mill liquors, containing little or no organic chlorine, form the recognized chlorine precursors, polychlorobenzenes and polychlorophenols. Tiernan⁸⁰ qualitatively confirmed that PCDDs are present in soot in fireplaces. Nestruck and Lamparski^{59,60,61} found PCDDs in soot from the top of all chimneys examined that were connected to wood-burning stoves in Oregon, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Olie et al analyzed fly ash from the combustion of painted wood over 60 years old and new wood treated with pentachlorophenol and found the PCDD and PCDF content of the fly ash from the two woods to be virtually the same. Wang et al⁸⁶ also found PCDDs in woodstove effluents but only "components with high chlorine numbers". The body of data strongly suggest that the production of PCDDs from the combustion of natural wood is a general phenomenon.

(3) Studies on the combustion products of coal Kimble and Cross⁴² were unable to find TCDD in fly ash from a powerhouse fired with low-sulfur, high-slag coal. Likewise, Harless and Lewis³¹ were unable to find TCDD in seven ash samples. Furthermore, DeRoos and Bjorseth¹⁹ did not detect TCDD in fly ash from a coal-fired power plant. The latter two studies had a limit of detection of about 2 parts per trillion. In yet another study Junk and Richard³⁷ were unable to detect TCDD at a level of 10 parts per trillion in effluent from coal/refuse combustion. The negative results were attributed to the temperature of ~1200°C at which the unit operated. Also, Redford et al.⁷² failed to find PCDDs and PCDFs in a facility which burned coal and refuse derived fuel.

On the other hand, Eklund and Stromberg²² detected PCDDs and PCDFs in two coal-fired combustors in Sweden. Chu et al.¹⁴ found measurable amounts of PCDDs and PCDFs in a sample from one coal-fired power plant in Canada but not from a coal-powered central heating plant. Czuczwa and Hites¹⁸ found PCDDs in fly ash from coal combustion. In addition to PCDDs and PCDFs, Eklund and Stromberg²² also reported finding chlorinated benzenes, biphenyls, and polynuclear aromatics in flue gas from coal combustion.

A laboratory study by Mahle and Whiting⁵⁶ of the combustion of bituminous coal in air showed that PCDDs are found either with coal alone or in combination with various chlorine donors. Thus available data on coal-fired powerhouses taken collectively are not sufficient for extrapolation to a reasonable conclusion at this time.

(4) Studies on the combustion products of light hydrocarbons. Krishnan and Hites⁴⁴ used methane and a methane/dichloromethane mixture as a fuel in a burner. They found chlorinated aromatic organic compounds in the effluent from the mixture but not from the methane alone. However, their analytical methodology was not sensitive or specific enough to detect PCDDs, if present. Also, others⁷⁸ have reported the formation of dioxin precursors when hydrogen chloride was added to the flame of a Bunsen burner. The possibility that PCDDs may be formed from gasoline in an automobile or truck motor has not been reported. Tiernan⁸⁰ did not detect PCDDs in scrapings from the tail pipe of a few old cars. However, his methodology was not as sensitive as that of Bunb⁵. Sensitivity of analytical methodology will be the key to further study. With respect to this body of data nothing can be concluded at this time.

(5) Theoretical studies related to the "trace chemistries of fire" hypothesis. Choudhry et al.¹⁵ examined a range of potential PCDD formation mechanisms and formulated a mechanism from published data and their own work which makes a good case for the production of PCDDs from simple organic carbon and non-organic chlorine molecules. Shih et al.⁷⁶ did a thermochemical equilibrium analysis to determine the potential for PCDD and PCDF formation in combustion systems over the temperature range of 533-1093°C. Although thermodynamic quantities were not available for the PCDDs and PCDFs, they were able to show that the formation of the polychlorobenzene precursors are favored. Shaub and Tsang⁷⁵ have constructed a kinetic model from

which they conclude that homogeneous gas phase formation of PCDDs in incinerators is unlikely but surface reactions and/or reactions inside solids (such as fly ash and other materials) seem to be strong candidates as potential sources for PCDD and PCDF formation. Theoretical studies thus far reported tend to support the hypothesis

(6) Studies to identify precursors and elucidate reaction mechanisms
Lindahl et al.⁵³ have shown that PCDFs and PCDDs are formed from the pyrolysis of polychlorinated diphenyl ethers. Liberti et al.^{3,50} describe "the basis of PCDD and PCDF formation through a thermal synthesis between two families of precursors one supplying the phenol as polypbenolic structure and the other acting as a chlorine donor." Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) was given as a typical example of a chlorine donor. Later Liberti et al.⁵² showed that pyrolyzed PVC indeed produced trace quantities of PCDDs and PCDFs. The quantity produced was not sufficient, however, to measurably increase the quantity of PCDDs and PCDFs produced by an incinerator operating at equilibrium as shown by Karasek.⁴¹

Eiceman and Rghei^{25,73} demonstrated the production of chlorinated aromatic compounds in flame chemistry through chlorination of fly ash and raised the possibility of a second mechanism of production, namely, gas-phase particulate reactions. They⁷³ also showed that 1,2,3,4-TCDD dehydrochlorinates to T₃CDD on fly ash in helium atmosphere between 250 and 300°C. Olie et al.⁶⁴ added hexachlorobenzene to wastes burned in a municipal incinerator and found no clear increase in either PCDDs or PCDFs.

Rappe and Marklund⁷⁰ studied both baghouse ash and bottom ash from an industrial boiler burning pentachlorophenol containing waste and sludge. The baghouse ash contained both PCDDs and PCDFs but the bottom ash had only PCDDs. This observation "could possibly be interpreted in terms of a de novo formation of PCDFs" in the flames. More than 90 percent of the PCDDs in the baghouse ash were those containing less than eight chlorines, providing further evidence for dehydrochlorination.

Junk and Ford³⁴ have listed the reported identified organic emissions from selected combustion processes. They found 331 different components in total, 109 from the combustion of coal, 235 from the incineration of wastes, and 69 from coal/refuse combustion processes. The precursors of most of these compounds have not been established although Ballschmiter² discusses this to some extent. Also not established is which of these are precursors for the formation of PCDDs and PCDFs. More precursors for the formation of PCDDs and PCDFs are continually being identified. The list is no longer limited to chlorinated phenols and their derivatives.

(7) Studies on the detection of PCDDs and PCDFs in environmental samples
The "trace chemistries of fire" hypothesis⁴ pointed out that PCDDs and PCDFs found in soil and dusts appeared to be related to combustion sources. Isomer group ratios related to dehydrochlorination chemistry were used by Townsend^{82,83,84,85}

to establish this relationship and identify thermochemical sources. Moreover, the concentration of PCDD isomers remaining in environmental samples after subjection to various natural processes should relate directly to the intensity of combustion in the vicinity of sampling as well as the nature of the destruction process. Eiceman and Rhee²⁴ have produced data which support this theory. By heating 1,2,3,4-TCDD adsorbed on fly ash in the presence of hydrogen chloride and air, higher chlorinated PCDDs were produced.

Although the concentration of 2,3,7,8-TCDD found in fish appears to vary with the intensity of combustion on the banks of the rivers from which the fish were taken as suggested by Crummett¹⁷ and confirmed by Kaczmar et al³⁸, the contribution from combustion relative to that from industrial sources remains undetermined. Considerable fish data are now available as reported by Harless et al³⁰, O'Keere et al⁶³, and Stalling et al⁷⁷. However, these data have only been collected from areas suspected of being contaminated by industrial activity. Collectively these data imply ubiquity which is the conclusion of Norstrom⁶² in his study of gull eggs. Support for this position relative to other chlorinated dioxins is also given in a study of human milk⁵⁴.

Czuczwa and Hites¹⁸ examined lacustrine sediments from Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Siskiwit, and Lake Zurich. They concluded that the "input of dioxins and furans to the sedimentary environment is due to the combustion of chlorinated organic products present in various wastes". The total isomer distribution from all these various lakes was remarkably similar and corresponded to that of the general background obtained by theoretical projections.

Particulate matter from the eruption of Mount Saint Helens was examined by Lamparski et al⁴⁶. The amount of PCDD found varied with the sample collection zone: urban > interstate highways > rural > blast area. This suggests that PCDDs were adsorbed on volcanic ash as it moved into areas where combustion was occurring.

Analysis of a sample of dried municipal sewage sludge sealed in glass and displayed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 revealed a dioxin pattern almost identical to 1981 and 1982 samples of dried sludge from the same source. Lamparski et al⁴⁷ showed that the concentration of OCDD, H₇CDD, and H₆CDDs were identical in the three samples and the isomer ratios were constant. The tetra isomers were in the same ratios but the concentrations were less in the 1933 sample. Since chlorinated phenols were not being produced commercially in 1933, the source of these dioxins is worthy of further study.

(8) Studies consisting of reviews, conclusions, and recommendations. Two studies reviewed the literature on PCDDs from combustion with considerable variation in their conclusions and recommendations. One of these³², commissioned by The American Society of Mechanical Engineers, concludes that "PCDDs are present at low levels in the emissions from many types of combustion sources" and defined the "most obvious need" to be the establishment of "the quantitative relationship between effects levels and emission levels" thus establishing "criteria for tolerable PCDD emission levels". The report recom-

mended studies on: "exposure and risk assessment, advances in measurement methodology, improvements in the toxicological effects data base, and improvements in the emissions data base"

The second review⁷⁶, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, concludes that the data indicates "that emissions of PCDDs and PCDFs are general phenomena related to all combustion processes". A research strategy is suggested which emphasizes the study of combustion process characteristics of specific combustion systems with the goal of minimizing the formation of PCDDs and PCDFs. The review supplies a "ranked priority list of combustion systems for source testing". This research position is similar to that taken by the Incineration Workshop at The Rome, Italy, Conference³⁴, which concluded, in part, "Rather than attempting to avoid certain items in incineration, it may be more important to optimize combustion conditions".

It is not yet possible to quantify the relative amounts of dioxins created during chemical manufacture, incineration, and other types of combustion. However, consideration of all the data on the formation of PCDDs and PCDFs leads to a conclusion similar to that of Gilbertson²⁸ who wrote: "The apparently disparate pieces of evidence from the late 1978 presentation by Dow now form a connected body. It is difficult, therefore, not to believe that chlorodioxins are entering the environment in trace quantities from very many sources."

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(Received in The Netherlands 8 April 1984; accepted 23 May 1984)