

Decision to Burn Dioxin Divides Arkansas Town

By KEITH SCHNEIDER
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JACKSONVILLE, Ark., Oct. 27 — After years of community strife and scientific dispute, environmental officials in Arkansas today gave final approval to the largest project ever undertaken in the United States to burn chemical wastes contaminated with dioxin.

An incinerator at the abandoned Vertac Chemical Company pesticide plant in the heart of this city of 29,000 people will begin burning the wastes on Thursday, the officials said. The old plant, once owned by a subsidiary of the Hercules Chemical Company, made Agent Orange defoliants used in the Vietnam War.

If the project goes as planned, according to an analysis by Pat Costner, a chemist with the environmental group Greenpeace, 150 to 800 grams of dioxin would be released into the air here over the two to three months it will take to burn the wastes. Officials with the E.P.A. said today that the agency was familiar with that estimate and did not dispute it.

The release would be second only to an explosion in 1970 at a chemical plant in Seveso, Italy, that dispersed roughly 2,000 grams of dioxin.

Disagreement on Risks

Once regarded as the most hazardous substance known to man, dioxin is now the subject of intense scientific debate, with researchers disagreeing about its effects.

In the case of the Italian explosion, studies thus far do not indicate that the release of dioxin increased cancer in the region, but some researchers note that the accident occurred too recently for its effects to be measured, since cancer can take a long time to develop. The Environmental Protection Agency began a study in May 1991 to re-evaluate the risks of dioxin, a project that is to be completed next year.

The incinerator here has stirred emotions on all sides, with some residents warning of a public health calamity and others saying it is time to rid Jacksonville of the chemical waste and end a controversy that has divided the community since the late 1970's.

Local opponents to the incinerator have hired the influential Government Accountability Project, a Washington public interest law group. Mick Harrison, a lawyer from the group, said today that a lawsuit to block the project will be filed here on Wednesday.

No other environmental issue in Ar-



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Jacksonville is torn over what to do with a plant's toxic waste.

kanas has so dominated the public debate during Gov. Bill Clinton's 12 years in the Governor's Mansion as the chemical contamination in Jacksonville and what to do about it. The Bush-Quayle campaign has not used the issue to make political points, principally because the Federal Government has been as involved in making decisions here as the state. In addition, President Bush supports incineration as a means for cleaning up the thousands of toxic waste sites across the country.

Joining the Decision

Aides to Governor Clinton said that he took part in the decision to incinerate some two million pounds of chemical wastes containing dioxin, a byproduct of manufacturing the defoliants. The Governor, his aides say, believes that leaving the wastes as they are is far more hazardous than destroying it through incineration. The aides also said officials of the Clinton-Gore campaign were not consulted about the decision because it involved a state issue.

Randall Mathis, the director of the state Department of Pollution Control and Ecology, announced the final approval for the burning at a community meeting here. The state and the Federal environmental agencies began planning the cleanup of the hazardous wastes here five years ago.

The previous year, in 1986, Vertac had abandoned the plant, leaving behind roughly 30,000 barrels of chemical wastes, along with acres of contaminated soil, tanks filled with toxic materials, and miles of poisonous piping. The E.P.A. lists the site among the country's worst hazardous waste sites, not only because of extent of the con-

tamination but also because the plant is only a few blocks from a day care center, a hospital and hundreds of houses.

Surveys by the state and Federal agencies say dioxin from the plant has contaminated Jacksonville's central city park, making its popular fishing and swimming lake off limits to the public. And already, more than \$24 million has been spent here by the Federal and state governments, much of it to incinerate chemical wastes considered less dangerous than those to be burned starting on Thursday.

These 2,700 barrels of highly toxic wastes contain a defoliant known as 2,4,5-T, which was an ingredient of Agent Orange and also popular in American agriculture and forestry. The compound was banned by the E.P.A. in 1970 because it was linked to birth defects.

The barrels containing the 2,4,5-T wastes here also hold 50 to 100 pounds of dioxin, a byproduct of heating compounds containing chlorine.

Dioxin's notorious reputation and the Vertac plant's proximity to Little Rock, the state's largest city, have made the state and Federal effort to dispose of the waste a study in the management of a complex health issues.

Mr. Clinton's aides and several city leaders today said the Governor's work on the issue has been exemplary.

"He's relied on scientific analysis, the best technical experts, and health professionals to advise him," said Michael Wilson, a Democratic state representative from Jacksonville. "Something had to be done and Clinton took the steps that were needed to make sure it was done safely."

But opponents of incineration in Jacksonville said today they have come to distrust the state and the Federal Government. They point to a review of test results done by Ms. Costner that found that the incinerator can destroy only 99.98 percent of the dioxin, not the 99.9999 percent required by Federal law. The discrepancy means that much more of the compound than originally expected could be released. State and Federal officials confirmed Ms. Costner's results but said the lower rate did not violate Federal law in this case.

Some residents also blame the plant for birth defects and what they perceive to be higher rates of liver illnesses, kidney disease and cancer. They say state officials have not made public the results of a health study that was

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