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Half-Truths On Dioxin Incineration

By Steve Taylor

As state and local authorities draw near to permitting the Times Beach incinerator, Syntex and the Environmental Protection Agency are providing half-truths about the incinerator's performance.

Despite overwhelming evidence that the permitting process for Superfund incinerators is inaccurate and misleading, old, worn-out arguments that were used to deceive the citizens of Arkansas are being repackaged and presented to Missourians as proof of the project's safety.

In Arkansas, the Vertac superfund incinerator had passed all the same requirements that the Times Beach incinerator is expected to meet. The Arkansas incinerator was eventually shut down for numerous safety violations, but only after contaminating the neighboring community. The incinerator caused marked increases in the blood levels of dioxin and other toxins.

In 1992, the EPA's own policy analyst, William Sanjourn, strongly criticized the agency's method of determining an incinerator's efficiency in destroying and removing hazardous waste. The efficiency rating is the cornerstone of any incinerator's permitting process and is invaluable in calculating its efficiency and safety. In his memo, Sanjourn noted that using a surrogate material rather than the real contaminant to calculate destruction-and-removal efficiency allowed EPA to "issue permits to operate hazardous waste incinerators which do not meet EPA minimum performance standards and places the public health in jeopardy."

At Syntex's press conference in January a destruction-and-removal efficiency report on a surrogate- not dioxin- was presented as its evidence of the incinerator's performance.

Syntex also made surprising claims that stack emissions were hundreds of times lower than local permit standards. A cursory inspection of data reveals several misrepresentations.

First, no actual destruction-and-removal efficiency was calculated for dioxin. Second data were not provided for the actual amount of dioxin in the kiln when emission samples were taken. There is in fact, no evidence that dioxin was being destroyed when stack gases were sampled.

Finally, data were not provided for periods of operational upsets. The incinerator experienced an average of five kiln overpressurizations per eight hours of operation. Kiln overpressurizations are a cause of fugitive emissions through the venting of untreated material directly into the environment. The EPA's risk assessment allowed for only one emergency venting per week.

After local agencies grant the final permits, there will be no continuous monitoring of dioxin emissions. In fact, local governments will be handing over the wheel to the two parties, Syntex and the EPA, that challenged and defeated a county ordinance designed to monitor and hold dioxin emissions to the EPA's own risk assessment.

Though dioxin dominates the current debate, the Times Beach Action Group has discovered that polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are also a major part of the waste to be burned. An obscure document from the Centers for Disease Control talked about soil samples from the horse arenas that started the original investigation. The death of animals and the acute illness of several children at these sites brought the matter to federal attention. Russel Bliss was the hauler of hazardous-waste oil who was responsible for contaminating the 27 dioxin waste sites. EPA claims that the dioxin originated from the Syntex plant in Verona, Mo. Samples from the horse arenas had PCBs ranging up to 1.5 million parts per billion.

The same document from the Centers for Disease Control shows that no PCBs were found at the Syntex plant in Verona. This challenges EPA claims that all the "pollution came from the same source." It appears that if the EPA were to do an accurate risk assessment on site soils, it would be forced to admit to other sources of hazardous waste- sources that could be held liable under Superfund law.

Soil from the horse arenas represents more than 20 percent of the soil to be incinerated at Times Beach. On Oct. 26, EPA's regional director admitted that PCBs exist in site soils at "greater concentrations than dioxin."

The laboratory that was hired to complete the incinerator's risk assessment noted that the EPA did not, however, provide information on PCBs or relevant sampling data. PCBs were not included in the risk assessment or permit application as required by law.

The EPA recently announced that some non-dioxin waste at the Bliss farm will be taken to another facility permitted to burn non-dioxin waste. The agency will literally try to separate dioxin-contaminated top soil and leaching affluent from buried drums. It is a desperate attempt to separate not only chemicals but also avoid questions about legal liability and the waste hauler's clients.

It appears that not only is the EPA relying on smoke and mirrors to sell the burner to the Show Me State; it is now forced to juggle chemical waste sites and their constituents to maintain the public trust.

Steve Taylor is a representative of the Times Beach Action Group