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Burned Up About Times Beach

By Steve Taylor

A federal judge recently overturned a St. Louis County ordinance written to ensure that the Times Beach incinerator would be held to a toxic emission standard based on the Environmental Protection Agency's own risk assessment. This ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, Syntex, the company liable for the cleanup, and the EPA, typifies the disregard federal agencies have historically displayed toward Missouri citizens.

The exclusion of the county in the process symbolizes what many of us have known for long; although the federal and state governments publicly solicit input from citizens, there is no room for their concerns. No one, no fact, no threat to public health will be allowed to interfere with the agenda to close the door on the dioxin debate in Missouri. In the words of Syntex spokesman Gary Pendergrass, "The people of Times Beach have lived with this problem for a long time. I'm confident we will be able to solve this problem once and for all."

To those of us who have lived in one of the 27 Missouri dioxin sites, a lack of straight answers on the health effects of dioxin on people is a continuing source of frustration. Federally funded reports are consistent only in their mendacity.

In 1990, a report by the Committee on Government Operations, "The Agent Orange Coverup: A Case of Flawed Science and Political Manipulation," was submitted to Congress. According to the report's executive summary, "The Centers for Disease Control study was controlled and obstructed by the White House primarily through its Agent Orange Working Group and the Office of Management and Budget, because the Reagan Administration had adopted a legal strategy of refusing liability in military and civilian cases of contamination involving toxic chemicals and nuclear radiation."

The CDC will be responsible for the dioxin blood level tests run on residents near the Times Beach incinerator.

On May 2, 1995, a researcher funded by the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry falsely reported to St. Louis County's Dioxin Monitoring Committee that dioxin blood levels in residents near an Arkansas incinerator had decreased. This was touted by local EPA official Bob Field as evidence that the planned Times Beach incinerator is safe.

When the Arkansas researcher, Morris Cranmer, was forced to reverse his findings after citizen groups acquired the study's raw data, federal and state officials accepted the incident as a simple error. Cranmer's federal funding to perform the study- despite his pre-existing felony fraud record for giving false statement to two banks - inspired less confidence in residents near the Times Beach facility.

The state of Missouri maintains the only registry of residents exposed to dioxin in the nation. According to the Missouri Department of Health, the federal toxic substance agency is considering cancelling its funding. Also the Department of Health has admitted that it has “been doing no real studies” on previously exposed Missourians.

With such dubious research on the effects of dioxin on civilians and veterans, it is easy to see how liability-driven corporate-bureaucratic scientists can stat that there is no direct evidence that dioxin harms humans. To those of us who have been contaminated and know of the high rate of disease in the exposed population, this is one of the greatest tragedies. It is also difficult to believe that any agency, including the EPA, could produce an accurate risk assessment for burning dioxin. For residents whose community is about to host the final solution, the Times Beach incinerator, it is a source of unrest.

Gov. Mel Carnahan must try to reopen the consent decree that orders incineration as the means of remediation. To not do so, or to trust the health of Missouri residents to these renegade agencies, is an affront to the Show-Me state’s motto: “The welfare of the people shall be the supreme law.”

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