

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#12 - Government Destroys Data About Irradiation Of WWII Veterans By A-Bomb, H-Bomb Use And Test February 15, 1987

A federal district judge fined the federal Veterans Administration (VA) \$115,000 for "recklessly" destroying thousands of documents it had been ordered to produce in a lawsuit by veterans who say they were exposed to excessive radiation. The judge said she would appoint a special master to oversee the agency, to assure that no further evidence is destroyed or withheld and she warned the agency against further harassment of employees who testified against the agency at the hearing.

The ruling said "there is significant circumstantial evidence" to show that, during the summer of 1986, officials of the VA consciously purged their files of any documents that would be helpful to the veterans' case.

Witnesses testified that VA workers who questioned the legality of the destruction were threatened by supervisors. The group filing the lawsuit, the National Association of Radiation Survivors, represents thousands of veterans who were exposed to life-threatening doses of radiation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan--where the first atomic bombs were exploded in 1945--and at later nuclear tests after World War II.

--Peter Montague

FDA PROPOSES SLACKENING RULES TO ALLOW PVC IN FOOD PACKAGES

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) proposed regulations for the limited use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) in food packaging (rather than a ban on the use of PVC) could result in a doubling of the annual production of food-grade PVC resin, according to a survey by the Vinyl Institute, and the increase could hamper NJ's efforts to manage its solid waste.

The 1983 survey found that annual production of the resin could increase from 250 million pounds that year to 600 million pounds by 1988 if FDA rules were relaxed. Because of the shortage of landfills, NJ has been trying to recycle or incinerate its solid waste. There is no known way to recycle PVC at this time and scientists differ on whether the burning of chlorinated substances produces dioxins.

In 1975, the FDA proposed restrictions on the use of PVC in food packaging because high levels of vinyl chloride monomer, a cancer-causing substance, migrated into the foods. Improvements in plastics technology have dramatically reduced the level of monomer in PVC and there is now less concern about food contamination.

--Peter Montague

NEW CALIFORNIA TOXICS LAW SPURS SIMILAR ACTION IN OTHER STATES

The approval by California voters of Proposition 65, a new law regulating the disposal of toxic chemicals, has encouraged political leaders and environmentalists from other states to try to get similar laws passed elsewhere. Proposition 65 prohibits the discharge of any known carcinogenic chemicals anywhere where they could enter drinking water supplies, and it requires the labeling of consumer products containing even trace amounts of chemicals known to cause cancer or birth defects and requires the posting of safety warnings at workplaces where such chemicals are present.

Environmental groups in NY, NJ, LA, CO and at least a dozen other states plan to seek similar laws. The Sierra Club is working on a generic version of the bill that could be used by all states and is preparing a set of training materials for citizens groups that want to pass such laws. The CA law goes into effect in stages beginning Jan.

1, 1987 and will be in full effect in late 1988.

The law requires state officials to put together by the spring of 1987 a list of chemicals that could cause cancer and birth defects, using the list already compiled by the U.S. Public Health Service as a guideline. Oil companies, agricultural interests and other businesses, including brewers, oppose Proposition 65, saying that drinking water was already protected by existing laws and the new law will add hundreds of millions of dollars annually to their operating costs.

--Peter Montague

SAFETY CONCERNS SHUT REACTORS AT GOVERNMENT A-WEAPONS PLANT

The 23-year old N reactor at the Hanford nuclear reservation in Richland, WA automatically shut down Dec. 28, 1986, when a water-flow monitor gave a false reading. A spokesman for UNC Nuclear Industries, operator of the reactor, said workers believe that a device that controls the monitor malfunctioned, causing the shutdown. A dozen reviews of the reactor's safety and design have called for extensive modifications in the plant's radiation confinement system, remedies to possible hydrogen buildup after an accident, and other corrections. The N reactor is the only American reactor that resembles the reactor at Chernobyl (which exploded on Apr. 26, 1986) in that it has a graphite-moderated core, water cooling and no containment dome. Every major plutonium-producing facility on the Hanford Reservation is now closed for safety reasons.

--Peter Montague

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