

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#8 - U.S. Firm Runs Gene Experiments Without Regulation In Argentina

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The Wistar Institute of Philadelphia, the nation's oldest biomedical research institution, says it ran experiments in biotechnology in Argentina in the summer of 1986 without the knowledge or approval of the U.S. or Argentine governments. The Institute said it was able to perform field testing of genetically engineered vaccines for animals without informing either government because Argentina has no rules governing the biotechnology industry and U.S. rules do not apply. The Institute worked in conjunction with the Pan American Health Organization. In the July 1986 test, 20 cows were inoculated with a gene-altered viral vaccine against rabies at an agricultural station in Azul, Argentina. In early September the Argentine government heard about the test from a Wistar scientist and barred any further experimentation, calling the experiment a "violation of ethical principles." A commission, named to study the incident, issued 3 reports criticizing test procedures for exposing [unknowing] farm workers and allowing the cows' milk to be consumed by humans. U.S. regulatory officials say the incident raises questions about the adequacy of the Reagan Administration's program to regulate the products of biotechnology research.

--Peter Montague

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NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION SAYS BUDGET CUTS ENDANGER ITS RESEARCH INTO KEY SAFETY ISSUE

A report by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) executive director said that the agency may not be able to finish a key nuclear safety study because of cuts in its research budget. The agency's total budget during 1986 was \$401 million, with about one-fourth of it for research. The cuts total \$81.6 million--\$30.6 million in the current fiscal year and \$51 million over the previous three fiscal years.

The NRC report says that a reassessment of the risk of serious accidents may not be completed satisfactorily and the commission will have only a limited ability to predict the outcome of equipment malfunctions at plants of the same design as Three Mile Island, (TMI) in Pennsylvania and to calculate the response of other reactors to breaks in the cooling water lines.

The report said that "Reductions in the safety research budget are expected to have intermediate and long-term implications that will be detrimental to public health and safety," and added that the budget cuts may end up costing the public more if safety problems lead to extended plant shutdowns.

--Peter Montague

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NEW JERSEY CHEMICAL FIRM SPILLS PESTICIDES INTO SWISS RHINE RIVER

On Nov. 11, 1986 authorities from the Water Safety Administration in Basel, Switzerland, said a second accidental leak of toxic chemicals had spilled into the Rhine River the day before the well-publicized Sandoz accident. The authorities said Ciba-Geigy, which operates a large plant in Toms River, NJ, had sent 88 gallons of the weedkiller Atrazin into the Rhine river from a treatment plant on Oct. 31, a day before a fire at the Sandoz plant leaked 30 tons of toxins. A spokesman for Ciba-Geigy said the leak happened when staff accidentally released chemicals into the river before they had been treated. According to the spokesman, Atrazin is not a powerful poison and the concentration was low--one-fifth of the concentration at which fish would have been killed.

Four countries took defensive action since in November, 1986, when a fire at a chemical company in Basel, Switzerland, spilled a huge discharge of toxic chemicals, including 8 tons of mercury, into the

Rhine River; a government environmental agency at Basel said it was 10 to 30 tons of chemicals.

Spokesmen in France, West Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, through which the Rhine flows, shut down all plants processing Rhine water for drinking, banned fishing in the river and closed sluices and locks to stop polluted water from contaminating estuaries, streams and underground water courses.

According to the Basel environmental agency, water used to put out a fire at a riverside storage building at the Sandoz chemical company carried 10 to 30 tons of toxic substances into the river. At least 34 different chemicals were washed into the Rhine, some of which may have fused into new compounds as a result of the high temperatures created by the fire. The chemicals include dyes, insecticides and mercury.

--Peter Montague

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RACHEL DATABASE WILL INCLUDE CASE STUDIES OF INCINERATORS, COMPOSTING PLANTS ACROSS U.S.

The Institute for Local Self Reliance in Washington, DC has completed case studies of 24 large and small incinerators and composting plants across the U.S.; their report will be loaded into the Rachel Database during March, 1987.

The case studies discuss the operating experience, capital costs, operating and maintenance costs, technology installed, markets for recovered products, and revenues, of 24 waste processing plants.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: studies; biotechnology; industry; argentina; government; vaccines; pan american health organization; testing; regulations; ronald reagan; water; water pollution; drinking water; fishing; water safety administration; switzerland; chemicals; rhine river, germany; poisons; leaks; sandoz; ciba-geigy; atrazine; pesticides; mercury; france; west germany; netherlands; switzerland; spills; nuclear regulatory commission; tmi; studies; nuclear power; risk assessment; public health; accidents; budget; financing; funding;