

Rachel's Environment & Health News

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For the last several years two debates have been swirling around the notorious chemical dioxin. One debate has engaged real scientists in the question, How dangerous is dioxin to humans and to wildlife? The second debate has occurred within industries that release dioxin into the environment and so will be directly affected by the outcome of the science debate.

According to CHEMISTRY & INDUSTRY magazine (Feb. 18, 1991, pg. 112) the chlor-alkali industry (which produces chlorine, the use of which by many other industries creates dioxin) "has taken an active interest in the course of the scientific debate." In fact, the Chlorine Institute-- a trade association--is coordinating a "public outreach program" to "capitalise [sic] on the outcome of a recent Banbury conference on dioxin."

Could such a "public outreach program" have any effect? The NEW YORK TIMES took a most unusual step August 15, 1991, when it announced on page one that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was beginning a year-long review to develop "a new formal opinion on the risks of dioxin." The TIMES often reports that studies have been completed, but it rarely reports that studies have been begun. Furthermore, SCIENCE magazine had reported May 17, 1991 (pg. 911) that "(EPA) administrator William Reilly has launched a major new effort to reassess the toxicity" of dioxin--so the TIMES's August 15th news was three months old.

In the TIMES's August 15th story, EPA Administrator Reilly not only announced that his agency was undertaking a year-long review of dioxin toxicity, he also took the unusual step of suggesting to the TIMES how the study would come out: "I don't want to prejudice the issue, but we are seeing new information on dioxin that suggests a lower risk assessment for dioxin should be applied," Mr. Reilly told the TIMES. The next day the TIMES ran an editorial praising federal officials for "sensibly considering new evidence that could lead to relaxation of the current strict and costly regulatory standards [for dioxin]." And three days later the TIMES ran a second front-page story which began, "Dioxin, once thought of as the most toxic chemical known, does not deserve that reputation, according to many scientists." The TIMES did not name any of the "many scientists."

What "new information" about dioxin has EPA Administrator Reilly found? According to SCIENCE May 17th, the "new information" is a "description [given to Mr. Reilly by two EPA scientists] of a meeting last November at the Banbury Center at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory that Reilly says made the most compelling case for change [in EPA standards for dioxin]."

SCIENCE had written its own description of the Banbury Conference Feb. 8, 1991 (pg. 624): Science said 38 dioxin researchers from the U.S. and Europe met at Banbury and "reached an agreement that surprised almost everyone." SCIENCE went on to say, "And this unlikely agreement on how dioxin works at the molecular level--and some hurried calculations scribbled on a blackboard--could force a dramatic change in how the federal government assesses the risk of this and similar carcinogens [cancer-causing chemicals]."

However, two weeks later--February 22, 1991--SCIENCE reported something quite different about the Banbury meeting ("Flap Erupts Over Dioxin Meeting," pg. 866), revealing that the meeting had been sponsored by the Chlorine Institute and that the Institute had hired a public relations firm to circulate a summary of the meeting claiming a "consensus" had been reached when in fact nothing of the kind had happened. For example, one letter, from a PR firm to the North Carolina Environmental Management Commission, said, "The Banbury Conference was organized for the express purpose of developing a scientific consensus concerning a biological basis for risk assessment.... They were able to achieve consensus."

However, independent scientists who had attended the Banbury meeting dispute this view. For example, according to SCIENCE,

Dr. Ellen Silbergeld of the University of Maryland and "a number of other participants" at the conference felt "manipulated and misused." Silbergeld sent a letter to the Banbury Center's director saying, "I am in fact rather astounded by such a product from a Banbury Conference.... The press releases and statements imply that a major focus of the conference was a discussion of the regulatory risk assessments that have been applied to dioxins; this was not the focus of this meeting." "I did not expect to be manipulated by industry and government spokespeople (who are not dioxin researchers, incidentally) to be made into a supporter of their political views on dioxin and risk assessment," Silbergeld said.

According to SCIENCE, the Chlorine Institute initiated the Banbury Conference and paid for half of it. Science quoted The Chlorine Institute's head of communications, saying the Institute believed the meeting could be "beneficial to our interests, particularly our interest in the paper industry." The use of chlorine in industrial processes often leads to the creation of dioxin as a by-product; the paper industry is under great pressure to reduce its dioxin emissions. For example, the newsletter ENVIRONMENT WEEK reported Feb. 14, 1991:

"A \$1 million punitive damages award by a Mississippi jury last October against Georgia Pacific [paper company] for alleged dioxin pollution of the Leaf River has touched off a stampede of similar suits against paper mills in Mississippi, Tennessee and several other states. The legal actions, which involve thousands of plaintiffs and billions of dollars in damage claims against major paper companies, have begun to resemble the avalanche of legal problems that hit the asbestos industry in the 1980s."

Enormous dioxin liabilities don't stop with the paper industry. On July 10, 1991, a Missouri jury awarded \$1.5 million to the family of Alvin J. Overmann, a St. Louis trucker who died of cancer; his workplace had been contaminated by dioxin. Several hundred similar lawsuits are pending in the Missouri courts now as a result of the contamination of the town of Times Beach.

Why might the NEW YORK TIMES participate in a public relations campaign to promote the view that dioxin is less dangerous than previously believed? James Ledbetter, a media columnist for New York's VILLAGE VOICE said Aug. 27 (pg. 8) said, "For some reason, August is dioxin revisionism month.... Once again, the chemical industry is trying to bamboozle federal regulators and the public, with the eager cooperation of the mainstream press," he said, citing the TIMES. Ledbetter suggested that perhaps the TIMES's "industrial-strength enthusiasm over eliminating 'strict and costly' standards can be traced to the fact that the New York Times Company has an 80 per cent interest in a Maine paper mill, and a 49 per cent interest in three Canadian paper mills. Indeed, on August 12, just four days before [the Times's] editorial ran, two groups of Canadian Indians filed suit against Kimberly Clark and the TIMES Company for \$1.3 billion (Canadian), charging that one of the mills has polluted three rivers with dioxin and other toxins," Ledbetter said.

A two-day Citizens' Conference on Dioxin has been organized by an international group of scientists and researchers. It will be held Sept. 21-22 at the Omni Europa Hotel in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The first day ("Defining the Problems") will feature three sessions: (1) A Lay Person's Guide to Dioxins and Related Compounds; (2) A Status Report on Dioxin's Impact on Human Health and the Environment; and (3) Fraud and Manipulation in Dioxin Studies.

The second day will feature "Solutions Promoted by Citizens": (1) Clean Production, Waste Reduction and Zero Discharge; (2) Getting the Chlorine Out of the Paper Industry; and (3) Banning Incineration. To attend, phone Paul or Ellen Connert in Canton, NY: (315) 379-9200. Fax: (315) 3790448. More on this important event next week.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: dioxin; health effects; chemistry & industry; studies; chlorine; banbury conference; new york times; epa; science magazine; william reilly; regulation; standards; chlorine institute; north carolina environmental management commission; risk assessment; industrial waste; fines; leaf river, ms; ms; tn; georgia-pacific; paper; liability; mo; times beach, mo; chemical industry; james ledbetter; citizens conference on dioxin; nc; paul connett; zero discharge; waste reduction; incineration;