

Plan to Burn Dioxin Stirs Fear in Arkansas

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LEAD: Unless a small, determined band of residents have their way, this city of 29,000 people is about to become the site of the nation's largest incineration of dioxin.

Starting in mid-August, a state contractor plans to burn 28,500 barrels of toxic waste at an abandoned pesticide plant in the middle of a residential neighborhood where subdivisions run to the edge of the chain-link fence. The burning will go on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for 7 to 10 months, until all the barrels are gone.

Health Effects in Dispute

Most of the barrels are full of chemicals like DDT, aldrin and dieldrin, wastes from more than three decades' production of pesticides and herbicides. About 2,800 contain dioxin, whose effects on human health are debated but whose toxicity is widely acknowledged: The town of Times Beach, Mo., was evacuated and abandoned after it was discovered that dioxin in waste oil had been sprayed on the streets.

Opponents, saying Jacksonville's pesticide industry is responsible for a rash of cancers, stillbirths and miscarriages among residents, fear that the burning could release deadly chemicals and sow still more illness. But state and Federal health officials say they have found no evidence of illness that could be linked to the toxic waste. And the Environmental Protection Agency says the incinerator will reach such high temperatures - 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit - that it will destroy all but infinitesimal traces of the chemicals.

Nevertheless, what happens here will have an effect on how hundreds of other cities and towns deal with their highly toxic waste sites. "There is a rush to burn all over the country now," said Hugh B. Kaufman, assistant to the director of the Hazardous Site Control Division at the United States Environmental Protection Agency. "If the Jacksonville burn occurs, it's going to give more impetus to burning toxic waste on sites in populated areas, which is going to save the responsible parties a lot of money."

'Go Get 'Em'

The last pesticide manufacturer in Jacksonville, the Vertac Chemical Corporation, stopped production in the early 1980's and closed for good in 1987. But on humid days here, the smell of pesticide still lingers in the air. The opponents of the incinerator, a few dozen fiercely committed residents who have the backing of Greenpeace and other national environmental groups, say the cancers, stillbirths and other health problems that have ravaged their families can be traced

directly to the toxins produced and stored by Vertac and its predecessors, including the defoliant Agent Orange.

"Just before my mother died at 55 with a rare liver cancer, she said to me, 'How come everybody around this town dies early?' " said Patty Frase, who herself had four miscarriages before moving away. "She told me, 'Go get 'em.' And I am."

Although incineration of toxic waste still stirs considerable scientific debate, the temporary incinerator in Jacksonville is one of the first in a wave of such projects. In the last two years alone, the Government has authorized the use of 60 temporary incinerators at toxic waste sites, said Paul Nadeau, acting director of E.P.A.'s Hazardous Site Control Division. These temporary incinerators, like the one in Jacksonville, are designed to be removed after the waste has been burned. Only a few of the 60 incinerators have been built so far.

The agency permits the use of these incinerators at the nation's 1,219 worst hazardous waste sites catalogued on the Superfund National Priorities List. About 400 municipalities are on the list; Jacksonville alone has three Superfund sites - the chemical plant and two city-owned landfills.

Aside from the temporary incinerators, waste disposal companies have proposed building permanent toxic waste incinerators in 25 cities, including Kansas City, Mo.; Memphis; Houston; Las Vegas, Nev.; Linden, N.J., and Model City, north of Niagara Falls, N.Y. These commercial incinerators would burn 750,000 tons of toxic waste a year, about double the capacity of existing commercial incinerators that burn toxic waste.

But Mr. Kaufman of the E.P.A.'s Hazardous Site Control Division, a frequent internal critic of the agency, said that if the Jacksonville plan was stopped, it would send a signal to the rest of the country "that this is an unacceptable way of handling the problem."

Opponents of the Jacksonville incinerator say the drums of waste should be stored in concrete bunkers while new disposal technologies are developed. They plan to file lawsuits to stop the incinerator as soon as it starts burning toxic waste. They demand an environmental impact study of the incinerator's effect on the community, buy-outs of several hundred homes that border the plant and other toxic waste sites in Jacksonville, and a comprehensive health survey of people living near the sites.

E.P.A. Insists It's Safe

The E.P.A. replies that incineration is safe and is the only legal way of disposing of dioxin. "We are satisfied we have the technology to do the job," said Carl E. Edlund, chief of agency's Superfund Program for the Southern region. "The E.P.A. has had ongoing investigations into incineration technology since the 70's. We have a high degree of confidence in it."

But Mr. Kaufman said the agency's public pronouncements on incineration did not reflect the its internal concerns. Citing an April 1985 report by an E.P.A. scientific advisory board that was highly critical of incinerator safety regulations, Mr. Kaufman said there was no technology available, then or now, to keep constant track of the emissions from an incinerator's stack.

Instead, incinerator performance is projected, based on initial test burns and the incinerator's general operating conditions.

As a result, incinerators may be just converting one hazardous substance into another, the panel said. "By E.P.A.'s own admission," Mr. Kaufman said, "its regulations on incinerators are lacking and don't do the job of protecting the environment and public health."

Dioxin has been burned at two other sites in the United States, Gulfport, Miss., and Denny Farms, Mo., without apparent incident. But the quantities were small, and opponents say they give no indication of the scale of the incineration planned for Jacksonville.

The Dioxin Puzzle

The chemical is itself a mystery. In laboratory animals it causes cancer, birth defects and developmental defects, and it reduces immunity to a variety of diseases.

But there has been no documentation of these effects on people, even though dioxin has long been a focus of scientific and environmental inquiry - at the center, for example, of the long-running dispute over the possible effects of Agent Orange, the defoliant used in Vietnam. The only ailment dioxin is known to cause in humans is chloracne, a skin disease. The largest dioxin release in history, in an accident at a chemical plant in Seveso, Italy, in 1976, resulted in no deaths or permanent injuries.

Dr. Vernon N. Houk, an assistant surgeon general and director of the Center for Environmental Health and Injury Control at the Federal Centers for Disease Control, says a growing body of information indicates that people are not as susceptible to dioxin as animals.

Outrage Over an Article

Jacksonville is a highly transient community, dominated by the Little Rock Air Force Base, which contributes a third of the city's 29,000 population and most of the economic base.

In April, when Family Circle magazine named Jacksonville as one of 17 cities and towns that might be "at risk from contamination," local leaders were outraged. "The editors of Family Circle have been in the kitchen too long," Garrick Feldman, editor of The Sunday Leader, wrote in a front-page column, and the City Council passed a resolution of censure. The magazine responded in August with an article that focused on Jacksonville, titled "Toxic Nightmare on Main Street."

Officials here still support the incineration plan. "People all over the state want a health study every time they find a dump or chemical plant in their neighborhood," said Dr. Thomas C. McChesney, a Jacksonville veterinarian who is the state's chief epidemiologist. He said none of public health statistics for Jacksonville were unusual. "You can do the study for political reasons, but not for scientific reasons."

Mayor Tommy Swaim said, "I haven't asked for a health study, but I would not oppose one."

But the opponents say their own medical histories are reason enough for a health study. "I've been to too many hospitals, I've been to too many funerals and I've seen too much to think there isn't mass murder going on here," said Mozelle Bergschneider of People Against a Chemically Contaminated Environment, the local anti-incinerator group.

The opponents say they have a hard time getting officials to take any of their concerns seriously. Ms. Frase, the former Jacksonville resident who is a co-founder of the Environmental Congress of Arkansas, said she had "begged and pleaded with the city to put up fences and warning signs" at contaminated sites in public areas of Jacksonville; the signs she puts up, she added, are routinely removed. For example, dioxin has been found in the fish and sediment of Lake Dupree, a pond next to a baseball diamond in the city's Dupree Park. A sign near the lake says, "Unauthorized persons keep out," and another has a no-fishing symbol.

Asked why the city does not put up fences or use more descriptive warnings, Mayor Swaim replied: "If you put fences up, people would just climb over them. But if it makes people happy, I would put up a no-swimming sign."