Regulators struggle with dioxin problem

BY BOB ANDERSON
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When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found dioxin in fish downstream of four paper mills in Louisiana among more than 100 such problems across the nation, it sent shockwaves through the state's environmentalists and regulators.

"We never dreamed we had dioxin in our discharge," says one paper mill official.

Dioxin, particularly in its TCDD form, is a potent toxin linked in laboratory studies to cancer and reproductive problems. It's the chemical that gave Agent Orange its infamy. It's the chemical that caused the buyout of a contaminated Missouri town.

It can be measured even below the parts-per-trillion level, but what the risks are at a few parts per trillion is a matter of much debate and limited science.

Now, months after EPA took the fish samples, state regulators are frustrated.

Their displeasure is aimed at EPA and some members of the paper industry.

EPA has put a national problem to the states, which don't have the federal resources to determine what dioxin's low-level risks are, according to officials with the Department of Environmental Quality.

The result will not only be duplication of efforts, but a patchwork of regulatory schemes that could leave states bidding for the paper industry by promulgating weak standards.

To set a regulatory number, "you have to have scientific backing, and this is really the job of EPA," says Maureen O'Neill, DEQ's assistant secretary in charge of water.

O'Neill is also unhappy that some companies have not responded quickly to DEQ's request that they do more fish sampling to determine the extent of the problem.

"We have got to move," O'Neill said.

"Doing nothing is not an option."

Officials with Georgia-Pacific Corp. in Zachary say their response to DEQ is in the mail, but they're not sure fish sampling is the answer to the problem.

In fact, they said, there may not really be a problem.

A fish study as proposed by DEQ won't really answer the question of whether dioxin in fish at the parts per trillion level is a danger to health, said Terry Heald, the company's general manager.

"If there is a credible scientific study that can be outlined, we're perfectly willing to pay the expense," he said.

But simply pulling fish out of the river and testing them doesn't provide evidence of a health danger, nor does it show the source of the dioxin, he maintained.

If there is to be a fish study, Georgia-Pacific thinks it makes sense to put it off until DEQ gets the results back from fish samples it took near the company's discharge. With the slow turnaround on dioxin tests, that could be weeks or months.

Georgia-Pacific and James River, another paper mill that discharges to the Mississippi River, have looked at a joint study of fish upstream of their plants to determine how much dioxin appears to be coming into Louisiana from the river, said Ron Uise of Georgia-Pacific.

DEQ officials say they too are concerned about how much dioxin is coming into Louisiana from other states and that everybody would like to see stong federal standards rather than each state coming up with its own criteria.

Louisiana is not only at the bottom of the funnel of the Mississippi River, but paper mill discharges also reach Louisiana from Arkansas and Texas via the Ouachita and Red rivers, they said.

"We'd spend a dollar to pay for this," said DEQ's Marion Fannly, "but we'd like to see it nationwide."

In the meantime, O'Neill wants more information from companies on the levels of dioxin in fish downstream from their discharges and is disappointed that only one of the four firms -- International Paper Co. in Basfory -- responded to her request for a voluntary fish sampling plan by the Nov. 15 deadline she set. She said she may have to resort to a formal order.

Representatives of the companies have met with DEQ to discuss the matter, said Emily Stich of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry.

She also maintains the companies have tried to set another meeting with O'Neill without success.

Officials with the companies, which also include Boise Cascade Corp. in DeRidder, feel they are getting a black eye on the dioxin issue while there is no evidence they are causing a health problem, they say.

Dioxin can also be produced by industrial and municipal incinerators, wood stoves and some other industries that use chlorine.

In the paper industry, dioxin is the unwanted byproduct of chlorine bleaching and the industry is studying how to change its materials and processes to reduce or eliminate production of the toxic chemical.

The latest numbers show Georgia-Pacific has been able to reduce dioxin production by 56 percent, Usie said. Rather than focusing on determining the levels of dioxin that are currently in fish, he would rather spend it on finding ways to reduce dioxin production at the plant.

The entire exercise has been "very frustrating, because you can't just go out and say this one thing will solve the problem," Usie said.

"There are legitimate concerns on both sides. The issue is not going to go away, he added, that because dioxin accumulates in aquatic organisms so dramatically, she wants the problem solved quickly.

"The water and fish in the state belong to everybody," she said. She wants them clean.