

EPA DROPS THE BALL ON DIOXIN

By Jackie Hunt Christensen

Food Safety Project Director at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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When the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released its long-awaited assessment of dioxin this week, its conclusions corroborated what many scientists (and communities like Love Canal and Times Beech) have said for some time: that dioxin can cause cancer, a host of other effects, and that parts of the US population have dangerously high exposure levels.

Strong policy recommendations from the EPA would stimulate dramatic reductions dioxin emissions from many manufacturing industries. Unfortunately, the EPA is behaving like the sycophantic servants in "The Emperor's Clothes" fairy tale: rather than challenging the industries that create dioxin to stop producing it, the agency is standing behind a charade of toothless solutions that will do little to protect human health.

The first draft of the EPA's dioxin reassessment became public in June 1994. During the six-year lag, the International Agency for Research on Cancer in 1997 designated TCDD, the most toxic form of dioxin, as a known human carcinogen. Cases of spina bifida in children born to Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange have been linked to dioxin. Dioxin exposure has been found to alter glucose tolerance and thus may be associated with diabetes. In fact, more than 5,000 studies on dioxin's health impacts have emerged during these six years.

The EPA new assessment has identified food as the primary dioxin exposure to humans and, through its policy recommendations, places the responsibility on consumers to reduce risks by eating a low-fat diet from a variety of foods.

But the EPA's approach ignores the most important questions: Why is dioxin in our food? And what must be done to eliminate dioxin at its source?

Dioxin is not intentionally used in food production – not by farmers, ranchers or food companies. It is an unwanted by-product of combustion (burning) and chemical manufacturing processes where chlorine is present. According to the EPA, municipal solid waste incinerators are the top identified source of dioxin air emissions. Airborne dioxin from these incinerators can travel for thousands of miles where it falls on pastures, and is eaten by grazing animals. It is stored in fat, and when we consume animal products like ice cream or hamburger, we are eating dioxin, too.

Other major sources include cement kilns that burn hazardous waste, medical waste incinerators, and secondary steel smelters. Pulp mills that use chlorine to make white paper produce dioxin. So do manufacturers that produce polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, used to make everything from home siding to children's toys to medical supplies.

Considering the industries that might be affected by a stronger EPA dioxin policy, it is clear why the agency's evaluation is such a political hot potato. Powerful industry trade associations such as the Chlorine Chemistry Council and the Vinyl Institute have fought hard and paid dearly to prevent a crackdown against dioxin, advocating for voluntary measures while claiming that dioxin isn't all that bad. At times, they have been joined by food-industry groups who fear for their livelihoods if their products are stigmatized.

Thus far, the EPA has created the equivalent of the Emperor's invisible suit in its "Maximum Achievable CONTROL Technology (MACT)" regulations. The rules are meant to manage, rather than eliminate, dioxin emissions. MACT regulations mean less dioxin goes directly into the air or water. Instead, dioxin is trapped by pollution control devices or in sludge from sewage treatment plant. These materials may go to a landfill, or in the case of sewage sludge, may be put on farmland, ostensibly as a fertilizer. From this point on, EPA hands the responsibility to consumers to "eat a variety of foods" so that we don't take in too much dioxin.

The EPA's laissez faire approach to dioxin has carried a heavy cost. According to the leaked EPA reassessment, dioxin is in the bloodstream of nearly every American and in the breast milk of many women. Several US communities have been particularly hard-hit by dioxin exposure:

- Children in Mossville, Louisiana, where there are two large PVC factories, are being treated for attention deficit disorder at twice the rate of children nationally. Dioxin levels in Mossville residents are two to three times the national average.
- Cancer rates among the members of the Penobscot Nation in Maine are twice the state average. The Penobscots' traditional diet relies heavily on fish, but the chlorine-bleaching paper mills upstream have contaminated the fish with dioxin.

Fortunately, there are cost-effective ways to reduce dioxin right now. For example, about 85 percent of hospital waste resembles household trash which does not need to be burned to be rendered non-infectious. Intravenous bags, patient ID bracelets, and file folders do not need to be made out of PVC. Already, major manufacturers such as Ikea, Nike, Lego and Mattel have promised to shift from PVC plastics to safer alternatives. Paper can be made white with ozone or peroxide, rather than chlorine.

By focusing on food for solutions, the EPA unfairly places responsibility for dioxin exposures with consumers and farmers. Instead, the EPA should weave a suit of whole cloth: a multi-pronged strategy to eliminate dioxin production at the sources.