

The Green Front by Rogelio A. Maduro

EPA leak demonizes chlorine

The unscientific campaign to ban chlorine got a shot in the arm from environmentalists in Washington.

The foundering green campaign against chlorine received a boost from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in May, as the result of the leak of a portion of the EPA's dioxin reassessment report. Although the report was not supposed to be released until late June, copies of the chapter on "risks" were distributed to several government offices, making their way to environmentalist groups and the media. By May 11, the report was news all over the world.

The report warns of dire consequences from the continued use of chlorine, claiming that exposure to even minute traces of dioxin (a by-product of chlorine used in many industrial processes and incinerators) poses wider health risks than had been established in the medical literature, may harm the human immune system, cause developmental problems for unborn babies, and have adverse effects on sexual organs. It further claims that humans are exposed to this dioxin through the foods they eat.

Thus, the EPA is supporting allegations of "hormonal toxicity" by these chemicals, a theory for which there is no scientific evidence. This scare-theory has been used by the greens to claim that organochlorides (a family of chlorinated compounds which includes dioxin) cause such problems as shrunken penises and feminized men.

The leak came at a very critical time. Environmentalist efforts to ban chlorine had reached a dead end in Congress. The Richardson bill (H.R. 2898) had been taken out of the Clean Water Act and other attempts to ban

chlorine had suffered the same fate. The greens, who just four months ago were quite confident of passage of a ban on chlorine, were taken aback by a strong public reaction against their plans to stop the chlorination of water. It has been estimated that Congress received over 1 million phone calls and letters in February and March of this year, opposing such actions.

There is a great deal of debate in the administration over the issue, and the EPA's report has come under fierce attack by the scientific community for its flawed methodology and scandal-mongering conclusions.

To calm the furor, EPA officials told the press that the document is preliminary and could change. "It would be inappropriate to draw conclusions from it at this point," Lynn Goldman, assistant EPA administrator for prevention, pesticides, and toxic substances, said in a statement. Nevertheless, other EPA officials are telling the press that the key findings in the draft are not expected to change substantially, and that the report demonstrates that all dioxin emissions have to be eliminated.

One critic, Dr. Sue Ellen Pirages, vice president of Risk Communications International, a consulting firm which has examined the EPA report, summarized some of the complaints. She told Associated Press that "EPA has relied on very inconclusive data from animal studies," adding that despite 15 years of data measuring dioxin in humans, none of the adverse effects alluded to by the EPA scientists has surfaced. "We haven't seen birth defects and we haven't seen unexpect-

ed decreases in reproductive capabilities," she said. "We should be seeing these major health effects" if the EPA findings were valid.

The EPA report lies regarding the most fundamental issue regarding dioxin: the contribution of man-made sources versus natural sources. While radical environmentalists claim that all organochlorides are man-made, the fact is that more than 2,000 naturally occurring organochlorides have been discovered so far. Nature, through forest fires, volcanoes, and other sources, produces thousands of times more dioxins than man could ever produce. Thus, the most critical research issue for the EPA should be first to examine the natural background levels of dioxin, and then to determine what fraction of dioxin is contributed by man.

That is exactly the opposite approach from that taken by the EPA. The report states that waste incinerators, cement kilns, and industrial wood burning are "major contributors" of dioxin, while forest fires are "moderate contributors." That assertion is simply a lie.

The banning of chlorine would have severe repercussions on human health and the economy. Contaminated water supplies were the most serious health problem in the United States before the widespread chlorination of water. Filthy water carries deadly diseases including cholera, typhoid fever, and dysentery. According to the World Health Organization, more than 25,000 children die every day in the Third World as a result of contaminated water supplies. Three years ago, the government of Peru followed the EPA's recommendations and stopped chlorinating Peru's water supply. As a result, cholera has spread through the continent, infecting over 1 million people and killing more than 8,500.