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TOXIC WASTE: A PROFILE

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Profile of toxic wastes arising from new data

By Tom Charlier
Staff Reporter

Industries in Shelby County pumped nearly 77 million pounds of toxic wastes into the air, land, water and sewers during 1987, according to reports filed with federal officials.

Plants ranging from chemical manufacturers to printers to refineries legally released 14.7 million pounds of the wastes into the air and flushed more than 60 million pounds into Memphis' sewers, the reports show. The pollutants included cancer-causing solvents, noxious gases and heavy metals.

The reports, filed by 83 county firms, provide a telling first profile of toxic waste in the area. They show that substantial amounts emanate not only from such heavily industrial areas as Presidents Island, but from less obvious, suburban areas, such as Collierville.

Local regulators contend that toxic emissions have declined dramatically and appear to be safe, while environmental groups say the industry disclosures reflect a national problem that is out of control. The federal officials compiling the information, meanwhile, caution that the reports are not detailed enough to assess their full enviro-

mental and health implications.

Obtained by The Commercial Appeal under the Freedom of Information Act and from some of the companies, the reports were among 70,000 filings covering 16,000 facilities nationwide submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last July 1. They summarize releases of any of more than 300 chemicals considered toxic by EPA during the first reporting year of the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986.

Since national statistics based on the right-to-know reports

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Toxic

have not been compiled yet, comparisons with other regions are sketchy. But Shelby County companies released an amount equal to two-thirds of the toxic air pollutants released in the entire state of Maryland, based on a private study of that state completed last year.

KEY SOURCES

The reports showed that the largest sources of toxic wastes were the Du Pont Co. in Woodstock and Refined Metals Corp. in South Memphis, which discharged about 33 million and 16 million pounds, respectively, most of which went into sewers. The 10 biggest dischargers accounted for about 88 percent of all the toxic waste listed.

The reports also show that:

- Some local air discharges contained chemicals that are believed to be highly dangerous, yet are rarely subject to specific regulatory controls.

Velsicol Chemical Corp. in North Memphis released nearly 600,000 pounds of carbon tetrachloride. The Carrier Corp. in Collierville discharged 65,000 pounds of trichloroethylene. Both chemicals are suspected of causing cancer. Other releases in the county included smaller amounts of chlorine, cyanide compounds, cancer-causing benzene, various pesticides, arsenic and lead.

Ammonia was the largest single air pollutant — accounting for more than 5.6 million pounds — while sodium sulfate was the principal industrial sewage waste, with more than 13 million pounds discharged. Ammonia, a corrosive gas used in the manufacture of fertilizers and as a refrigerant, is considered an irritant but generally not a significant environmental hazard, federal officials say. Sodium sulfate is a salt created by the neutralization of acids.

the Shelby County reports.

Federal officials are proposing to establish standards for nine other pollutants, including two — trichloroethylene and chromium — reported locally. They say those pollutants could "cause serious and irreversible illness" or death. EPA found no evidence to support the regulation of two other widely reported Shelby County pollutants, methyl chloroform and toluene.

INDUSTRY VIEW

Industry representatives said their releases are both legal and safe.

Officials at Velsicol said their firm has cut back on virtually all its toxic releases. They said comprehensive studies of plant workers, who are subjected to greater exposure than nearby residents, show no ill effects from the company's emissions.

"I think where you'd probably see the adverse effects first would be on the plant site," said Charles Frommer, Velsicol vice president of regulatory, government and public affairs.

Du Pont representatives noted that their company has won awards from the World Environmental Council and other groups for its efforts to operate cleanly. The plant on Pite Road contains \$30 million in pollution-control equipment and has eliminated some toxic discharges altogether, they said.

"We really don't feel like there's any harm that comes from the emissions at all, and this is based on computer modeling as well as monitoring," said P.R. Phil Nolan, the plant's safety and fire protection manager.

The two local officials overseeing air quality and sewer discharges — Health Department pollution control manager Helen Keith and city public works director Benny Lendermon III — said they don't believe toxic emissions are causing any serious problems.

tionary sources, we're very comfortable with what's going on," Ms. Keith said.

MONITORING WASTES

Lendermon said the city has an elaborate program to monitor and control industrial discharges into its sewers. About a decade ago, he said, those discharges were a serious problem, occasionally killing much of the bacteria that treatment plants use to break down waste.

Today, however, about 150 companies have city permits regulating the amounts and kinds of waste they're allowed to discharge. Through a "pretreatment" effort, many firms dilute or neutralize compounds that could prove harmful at the city's two treatment plants, Lendermon said.

"If any kind of toxic material comes through that makes those bugs (the bacteria) halfway sick, then the whole thing fails. So we have to be real sensitive to those substances," he said.

Beyond the effects on the plants, environmental officials monitor the levels of some toxic pollutants found in the treated sewage released into the Mississippi River. Memphis' treatment plants comply with their state permits, but those regulations, like the ones for air, are somewhat general. They do set limits for individual metals and total pesticides but not for many other compounds listed on the reports.

SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Jessica Landman, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said toxic discharges into sewers can present serious environmental problems. She noted that recent EPA studies showed municipal standards are inadequate for regulating wastes from a number of industries, including fertilizer manufacturers, printing plants and hazardous-waste treatment facilities.

"Unless we get these standards in place and enforced, there are serious questions about whether these industries should be allowed to continue these discharges," she said.

Ms. Landman also said some discharges are so toxic that they cause problems in any amount.

The local companies' reports, for example, show that very small amounts of chlordane,

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