

The Embarrassing Odyssey of Seveso's Dioxin

Its disappearance and subsequent discovery in a French slaughterhouse prompts a hard look at European rules for moving toxic waste

Paris. Strict new European regulations covering the disclosure of information about the transfer and disposal of toxic chemical wastes are expected to be agreed upon shortly. This follows a bizarre black comedy surrounding the apparent disappearance last year of 41 barrels of waste material contaminated with dioxin from a 1976 factory explosion at Seveso, Italy, and their eventual discovery at the back of a unused slaughterhouse close to Paris in the middle of May.

The ministers of the environment of the ten member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) were set to meet in Luxembourg on 16 June to discuss proposals from the French gov-

their disposal. Mannesmann, in turn, subcontracted the disposal operation to a French waste consultant, Bernard Paringaux, who picked up the reinforced barrels of waste from Seveso last September, and drove them back to a warehouse owned by his own company on the outskirts of Paris.

The whole move was shrouded in secrecy. On crossing the border, Paringaux told customs officials merely that his load was made up of "halogenated aromatic carbons" and did not mention Seveso by name. Mannesmann told Hoffmann-La Roche that the wastes had been safely disposed of, but would not say where and Hoffmann-La Roche, relieved to get the wastes off its hands, did

a disposal plant in Germany. Other questionable dumps were also uncovered at several other sites in France and Germany.

Eventually, Paringaux admitted to French authorities that the dioxin had been moved "for temporary storage" to the nearby slaughterhouse, where the barrels had been sitting—unprotected—since their "disappearance." The barrels were immediately moved to an army camp, this time under the close eyes of French health authorities. And last week they were shipped from France to Switzerland, where they will shortly be incinerated at a disposal plant owned by another major Swiss chemical/pharmaceutical company, Ciba-Geigy.

No one has come out of the affair well. Hoffmann-La Roche had continuously assured the public that, despite its refusal to give details of the disposal procedure, there was no reason for concern. The company, which became the target of an international boycott by environmentalists and consumer groups, subsequently claimed it had been misled by Mannesmann and one of its officials has offered a public apology. It has also announced plans to sue Mannesmann, saying that the disposal contract had been a mistake.

The French government had to admit that it was unaware that the dioxin wastes had been imported from Italy, and subsequently that it had failed to track them down—the barrels are said to have been eventually located by German authorities, piqued at the accusations of their own laxity. Italy, too, appeared to be operating well outside the spirit in which the EEC toxic waste regulations were written.

France's environment minister, Huguette Bouchardeau, is now proposing to have fellow European partners adopt new rules aimed at preventing similar events in the future. Similar proposals were just endorsed by members of the European Parliament meeting in Strasbourg. These suggest, for example, that the international transfer of toxic wastes—a rapidly growing commercial business because specialized disposal facilities exist in different countries—only be carried out with the full knowledge and agreement of all countries concerned; that special transportation

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ernment that new rules be introduced requiring not only strict surveillance of the techniques used to dispose of toxic wastes, but also that public authorities be given detailed information about how the disposal has been carried out.

Officials from the EEC commission in Brussels, which introduced initial toxic waste regulations in 1978, have been pushing for such additional rules for some time. But it is only in the aftermath of the international disputes and public embarrassment caused by the disappearance of the Seveso dioxin that Europe's politicians now seem enthusiastic to move. The wastes were moved from Italy into France without the French government being informed, and after their disappearance there were suggestions that they had been disposed of in Germany, which the German government strongly denied.

The story of the dioxin wastes began last year when the Swiss owners of the Seveso factory, Hoffmann-La Roche Inc., having failed to find any chemical disposal site in Europe prepared to accept the notorious wastes for treatment, entered a contract with the Italian subsidiary of a major German engineering company, Mannesmann, to arrange for

not ask any more questions. An equally relieved senior Italian politician is said to have followed the wastes as far as the French border, then headed back to Rome.

But the secrecy has since boomeranged. In March of this year, apparently after a leak from the Italian authorities, *Science et Vie* published an article claiming that the dioxin had been imported into France and had subsequently disappeared. Paringaux refused to tell the French authorities what he had done with the 41 barrels, and was immediately imprisoned on charges of illegal disposal. The following week saw rumors and accusations flying across Europe and escalating public concern at the large loopholes in existing regulations on the transportation of wastes. For example, a chemical company need only disclose the ultimate destination of its wastes "if this is known."

The search for the dioxin had some unintended consequences. Investigators looking at a waste dump in the French town of Roumazieres, for example, did not find what they were looking for; but they did turn up 21 tons of illegally stored arsenic wastes, which were subsequently moved in a glare of publicity to

routes and border crossings be designated; and that heavy prison sentences be imposed on the producers or transporters of wastes who ignore the rules.

Keen to respond to growing public demands for tighter toxic waste legislation which existed before but was strongly firmed by the dioxin controversy, Eu-

rope's environment ministers are expected to move toward the French demands. In practice, this would involve introducing complementary legislation in each of the ten EEC countries. Meanwhile, the Italian government is still faced with the problem of how to dispose of the remaining contaminated equipment at the

Seveso factory. Its courts recently began to consider charges against the managers of the factory, whose trial began, ironically, within only a few days of the story about the disappearance of the dioxin wastes emerging into the headlines of the European press.

—DAVID DICKSON

NSF, Do You Take NBS . . . ?

The Reagan Administration has proposed that the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) be merged into a single agency. The proposal, which came out of the blue as part of a plan to reorganize the Department of Commerce, is likely to rekindle a long-standing debate about the organization of the federal government's scientific bureaucracy. The White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), for example, has for some time been quietly looking into the possibility of merging several agencies and programs into one Cabinet-level department of science.

The proposal to link NSF and NBS was apparently put together hastily. No details have yet been worked out for how the two very different organizations would be brought under a single umbrella. What seems to have happened is that NBS could not easily be fitted into a revamped Commerce Department, and because it is not sufficiently large or robust to stand on its own, a new home had to be found. NSF seemed like a convenient partner.

The merger plan was announced on 1 June as part of a proposal to establish a Department of International Trade and Industry by bringing together most of the economic and business functions of the current Department of Commerce and the responsibilities of the White House Office of the United States Trade Representative. Included in the new department would be the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Patent and Trademark Office.

The idea is to create a single, powerful department incorporating all the federal government's responsibilities for industry and international trade. The proposal invites comparison with Japan's mighty Ministry of International Trade and Industry, but the new department is unlikely to follow in MITI's footsteps by orchestrating domestic industrial policy—at least while the Reagan Administration is in office.

Several existing Commerce Department agencies could not be slotted into this new entity. They include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). With a budget of some \$850 million and a diverse range of functions, NOAA was deemed strong enough to exist on its own; it would be established as a separate agency. Less certain is what would happen to the Bureau of the Census. The Administration has announced that it would not be part of the new department, but says it has not yet decided where to put it. A decision will be made shortly.

As for the plan to merge NBS and NSF, a White House statement simply says that the two agencies will be "mutually supporting, since NBS has strong in-house scientific and engineering capacity and the NSF has strong programs

of support for research by universities and scientific laboratories." In other words, they are utterly different.

Exactly how the Administration plans to arrange the merger will not be known until detailed legislation is sent to Congress, and that may not happen for several weeks. As a practical matter, a change will be required in NSF's charter because it is currently prohibited from operating laboratories, which is NBS's main business.

The legislation to create the Department of International Trade and Industry faces a bumpy ride through Congress since it cuts across the jurisdictions of several committees. Some congressional staff members speculate, however, that the proposal to merge NSF and NBS may be separated from the main proposal, which could enhance the prospects of the merger.

In any case, the Administration's proposal is likely to provide a vehicle for a broader debate about the federal government's bureaucratic arrangements for supporting science and technology, and it could breathe new life into proposals that have been floating around for several years.

One such proposal, long touted by Representative George Brown (D-Calif.), is to establish a National Technology Foundation as a technological counterpart to NSF. The plan would be to combine into a single agency the NBS, the Patent Office, the National Technical Information Service, and the applied science programs of NSF. The proposal has been the subject of hearings by the House Committee on Science and Technology and is said to have generated interest among some key House Democrats. "We will be watching the debate over the Administration's proposals to see if we can get some of our goals through," says an aide to Brown.

Beyond that, there is the possibility of establishing a department of science by merging several existing agencies and programs into a Cabinet-level department. George A. Keyworth, President Reagan's science adviser, and some of his senior aides in OSTP began a study of such a proposal several weeks ago, according to reliable sources. The idea would be to create a department by pulling together NSF, NBS, NOAA, the basic science programs of the Department of Energy, and perhaps other civilian science programs. (The National Institutes of Health would not be included.) Asked where the OSTP study now stands, in the light of the proposal to merge just NSF and NBS, an OSTP spokesman said "I just have nothing to say about that."

Whether anything will actually happen as a result of all this remains to be seen. It is perhaps worth noting that the Administration came in with bold plans to scrap the departments of Energy and Education. So far, they remain intact.—COLIN NORMAN