

Plastics News
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DuPont needs to get priorities straight

The controversy surrounding DuPont Co. and perfluorooctanoic acid contamination in public water systems near its Parkersburg, W.Va., fluoroproducts plant offers a lesson in how not to build community trust.

In 1984, DuPont found the chemical in the water system of the Little Hocking Water Association Inc., which serves about 12,000 people in Ohio's Washington County, immediately across the Ohio River from the DuPont plant. But the company didn't tell the utility, and the information did not become public until 18 years later.

Now it's no longer hidden. There's a class-action lawsuit in West Virginia, and the Environmental Protection Agency has started a fast-track review of the safety of the chemical. PFOA is used as a processing aide to make fluoropolymers.

We don't really know how much risk PFOA is to people. It may not be much of one, but the Environmental Working Group argues that low PFOA levels found in people are too close to animal toxicity levels. It's an important question EPA has to answer, since PFOA, which is also known as C8, has been essentially unregulated for most of its history.

Putting aside for now questions of health and safety, there are also important questions of public trust.

DuPont defends its actions in not disclosing the test results because it said it "acted with the absolute confidence that the low or nondetectable levels of C8 found in the Little Hocking water samples in the mid-1980s posed no risk to the health of Little Hocking residents or our own employees in the area."

That may be true, but is that really DuPont's decision to make?

If a new contaminant was found in our drinking water, we'd want to know, or at least we'd want the experts running the water plant and other public health officials to know. Small wonder that the public doesn't trust the chemical industry, and that in the industry's own public opinion research, chemical companies fare only slightly better than nuclear power plants and HMOs.

The Little Hocking Water Association blames DuPont for the contamination, and it told EPA in comments that "regardless of the safe level, C8 does not belong in our drinking water. No one has ever claimed that it is beneficial to have it contaminating our water."

Another water system 15 miles down river from the DuPont plant, the Tupper Plains-Chester Water District in Reedsville, Ohio, told federal regulators that PFOA also has contaminated its pipes, which serve 5,000 homes.

Tupper Plains officials wrote that some are concerned about job losses if DuPont were to move the plant, but it also said that the EPA needs to investigate the chemical thoroughly to "remove much of the untrusted results that seem to be bubbling up everywhere."

Industry officials note that there's no evidence that PFOA has harmed anyone. They say they are very willing to work with EPA, and they point out that PFOA is critical to making fluoropolymers, which themselves have many critical, life-saving applications. Those are all fair points.

But they miss the boat on public trust. Chemical health issues will remain a major challenge, and the industry will find it tough to gain and retain public trust if it isn't scrupulously open with the public.