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Report cites PPG savings on mercury

Process could boost efficiency, phase out toxic discharge at Marshall plant

By Ken Ward Jr.

Staff writer

PPG Industries could become more efficient and boost production if it eliminated the discharge of the toxic metal mercury from its Marshall County chlorine plant, according to a new report from an international environmental organization.

PPG would save on energy costs at the same time it stops emitting mercury into the air and water, says the report from the group Oceana.

The switch to a mercury-free chlorine production process could cost PPG \$71.2 million, the group said.

However, PPG could over a five-year period save \$14.7 million on energy costs, \$2 to \$3 million on waste disposal and \$2 million on monitoring. Also, Oceana said the switch would allow PPG to increase production and sales capacity by \$82.2 million over that same five years.

The findings are part of a new report in which Oceana argues PPG and other companies with chlor-alkali plants should phase out their use of a century-old mercury-based production process.

“Of the serious environmental challenges posed by the industrial age, few lend themselves to clear, achievable solutions quite the way that mercury pollution in the chlorine industry does,” says the group’s report. “Depending on mercury to make chlorine is like depending on the Model-T for modern commerce, inefficient, to say the least.”

The PPG plant at Natrium, north of New Martinsville, is West Virginia’s largest source of mercury discharges to water and the state’s third largest source of mercury air emissions, according to federal data.

Part of the PPG facility makes chlorine by pumping saltwater through vats, or cells, of pure mercury.

It is one of only five chlorine production plants in the country that still uses — or has not promised to phase out — this century-old process.

Mercury is extremely toxic. Depending on the dose, human health effects from exposure can include subtle loss of sensory and cognitive ability, tremors, inability to walk and death. Of particular concern is the fact that mercury becomes more concentrated as it passes from a mother to her fetus. Children are at risk of having to struggle to keep up in school or needing remedial classes or special education.

In West Virginia, residents are cautioned to limit the locally caught fish they eat to avoid mercury poisoning.

Local environmental groups, including the West Virginia Rivers Coalition, have joined with Oceana to try to reduce or eliminate PPG’s mercury emissions.

“Mercury is a dangerous chemical that’s finding its way into our waters, and into the food we eat,” said Joe Peabody, acting director of the Rivers Coalition. “PPG needs to step up to the plate and act responsibly toward its employees and the communities in which it operates.”

PPG has said it has no plans to eliminate mercury at its Natrium plant, despite moving to do so at a similar facility in Louisiana.

At a permit hearing in December 2005, PPG lawyer David Yaussy objected to company officials being questioned about the other types of non-mercury chlorine units being used around the world.

“The technology that PPG uses at the plant is what it is,” Yaussy said. “What it might use or what other places use are irrelevant to what the permit limits ought to be for this plant with this technology.”

This week, PPG spokeswoman Betsy Bialosky said, “investing in mercury-free technology is not an economically feasible option for PPG’s New Martinsville plant.

“Marketplace conditions within the highly competitive global chemicals industry preclude us from making the investment,” she said. “Attempts to recoup the investment would require PPG to price itself out of the market in the face of lower-cost competitors.”

When Oceana began a campaign against mercury-based chlorine plants in 2005, there were nine such facilities in the United States. Since then, two plants have closed and two others — including PPG’s Lake Charles, La., plant — have committed to switching to a mercury-free process.

Nationwide, about 90 percent of all chlorine production is mercury free. No new mercury-based plants have been built since 1970.

At the PPG Natrium plant, three of the four chlorine units are mercury free. The fourth cell, which uses mercury, accounts for about 20 percent of the plant’s production and 60 of the facility’s 600 jobs, according to company testimony. The mercury cell has been in use since 1957.

The other four mercury-based chlorine plants in the country are Ashta Chemicals in Ashtabula, Ohio; Olin Corp. in Charleston, Tenn., and Augusta, Ga.; and ERCO Worldwide in Port Edwards, Wis.

At least 115 plants around the world have converted to mercury-free processes since 1974. Along with its ongoing conversion in Louisiana, PPG itself has also converted plants in Canada and Taiwan to mercury-free technology, according to Oceana.

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