Alabama poison plant targeted over environmental, terrorism fears

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OXFORD, Ala. (AP) -- The small factory at the end of Burton Street doesn't look like much from the outside, but its product is getting attention from Washington to the other side of the world.

Virtually unknown outside the neighborhood where it has been operating since the late 1950s, Tull Chemical Co. is the only known producer of Compound 1080, developed as a rat poison in German-occupied territories during World War II. Once banned in the United States, a teaspoonful could kill dozens.

Compound 1080 is now used only sparingly in the United States but more widely in New Zealand to control outdoor predators and pests. Animal welfare groups and other environmentalists say it should again be outlawed because it kills too indiscriminately.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., has asked the Department of Homeland Security to ban production of the odorless, tasteless poison for another reason: the belief by the FBI and others that Compound 1080 — the most toxic pesticide registered by the World Health Organization — could be used by terrorists to poison U.S. water supplies. There's no known antidote.

Trying to hold on to a business started by his grandfather, Tull Chemical owner Charles Wigley defends his product as safe when used properly. Other chemicals could be just as deadly in the hands of terrorists, he argues, and someone else could start making the poison.

Besides, unknown quantities of the poison could be stored around the United States from decades ago, before production was regulated.

"If they shut me down it's not like it's going to just go away," Wigley said.

Homeland Security spokeswoman Valerie Smith said the agency is reviewing Compound 1080, but it lacks the authority to ban production.

DeFazio previously asked the Environmental Protection Agency to shut down Tull Chemical because of safety problems at the company and the danger of its product, but officials refused. Neighbors of the factory weren't surprised.

Lea Cheatwood has lived about 150 yards from Tull Chemical for decades, but she didn't know what the company made until the early '90s, when a neighbor obtained a copy of an EPA audit that cited numerous safety problems at the small plant, located about 50 miles east of Birmingham.

Since then, Cheatwood has spent hours watching the plant and keeping logs that document truck traffic from the site, located in a city of about 15,000 people. Cheatwood said local, state and federal officials all have ignored complaints that the company transports deadly chemicals in unmarked trucks, has virtually no security and sits on the bank of a creek that regularly floods.

"They all just say it's not in their jurisdiction," Cheatwood said. "It's an extremely dangerous product, and it worries me it's made in my neighborhood."

Wigley said he follows the law and laces his poison with black dye that would show up if the chemical, an organic compound, got into either floodwaters in the neighborhood or — if used by terrorists — a public water reservoir.

"I haven't been contacted by Homeland Security, but EPA visits a couple of times a year," Wigley said. He accused the Oregon congressman of trying to make a name for himself with environmentalists by seeking the ban on Compound 1080.

"He's talking about shutting down a plant in Alabama. They're against outsourcing jobs, but he's talking about outsourcing mine," Wigley said.

Tull Allen, Wigley's grandfather, started Tull Chemical in 1956 after purchasing the process to make Compound 1080 from Monsanto Co., which had made the poison at a nearby plant that later became infamous for polluting Oxford and nearby Anniston with PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls.

Compound 1080 originally was developed as a rat poison in Nazi-controlled territory in the 1940s, and some research indicates Nazis considered

using it to kill people in Holocaust death camps before deciding it was too dangerous for guards, according to Brooks Fahy of the Oregon-based Predator Defense, which wants the poison outlawed.

The recipe made it to the United States, where the poison was used on rats and then at livestock ranches to kill coyotes and other predators.

Faced with complaints that the chemical was also killing eagles and other animals, the Nixon administration in 1972 banned the use of Compound 1080 for livestock protection. The Reagan administration reversed course in 1981, and the EPA said the poison could be registered for limited domestic use in poison-laced collars worn by sheep.

Government records show Tull Chemical closed for several years in the mid-1980s as the government considered whether to allow continued production of Compound 1080, but Wigley later reopened. He reinforced the buildings and installed a chain-link fence topped by barbed-wire after an EPA review noted inadequate security and other problems.

Wigley said he makes as much as five tons of the poison annually, with most of it being exported to New Zealand. He said his only U.S. customer is the Department of Agriculture, which said it uses less than four tablespoons of Compound 1080 annually in sheep collars. The collars kill coyotes by poisoning them when they bite an animal's throat.

The poison collars are used in nine states, but the government said they only kill a couple dozen coyotes annually. It was once used in California, but voters there in 1998 approved a ballot resolution banning the use of Compound 1080 and another poison, sodium cyanide.

Environmentalists in New Zealand oppose the use of Compound 1080, which they claim kills slowly and painfully and can poison animals that feed on carcasses of its victims. Their protests are echoed in the United States by groups including the Predator Defense, which got DeFazio involved in the issue.

The head of the Oregon-based organization, Fahy, has twice visited Oxford to gather information about Tull Chemical and Compound 1080.

"It's so dangerous there's no legitimate use for it," he said. "It is beyond belief that this place is operating and operating where it is."