

## **Congressman wants Tull Chemical in Oxford closed**

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An Oregon congressman urged the Environmental Protection Agency Friday to shut down Oxford's Tull Chemical, the country's only known producer of sodium monofluoroacetate, a pesticide used against coyotes in the West. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., sent a letter to EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt citing national security and environmental concerns with the chemical.

A representative of the EPA in Washington said the agency had not received the letter as of Friday afternoon.

"The potential for abuse of this substance in this age of terrorism is obvious, but your agency has the authority to stop its domestic production," DeFazio stated in the letter. "I urge you to do so immediately."

Tull Chemical has produced sodium monofluoroacetate, commonly known as Compound 1080, since 1956 at its plant in an Oxford neighborhood on Snow Creek. The facility's blue roof is visible from Quintard Avenue just below the bridge that connects Anniston and Oxford.

Charles Wigley, the owner and sole operator of the plant, said the pesticide has a legitimate purpose. He receives the majority of orders from New Zealand's Department of Conservation and Department of Agriculture.

New Zealand officials consider the poison essential to controlling opossums. The opossums' presence has led to deforestation in some areas, threatening the existence of endangered birds, Wigley said.

"Personally, I have never heard from the congressman before," Wigley said. "I am not sure he knows all of the properties of what I make."

DeFazio disagrees with the necessity of the chemical.

"Compound 1080 is one of the most lethal substances known to man that has no legitimate purpose," said DeFazio's press secretary, Kristie Greco. "In this new age of terrorism and as a senior member of the select committee on Homeland Security, Congressman DeFazio believes all Americans need to be concerned about dangerous substances and their potential misuse."

Residents of Williamson and Burton Streets have voiced concerns about their neighbor's methods of production for years. They say the plant lacks necessary measures to safeguard the chemicals, said resident Lea Cheatwood.

"We're making a little bit of progress," said Cheatwood, who helped organize a neighborhood petition drive against Tull in 1991 and continues to monitor it. "I'm thrilled to death."

The federal government banned the use of Compound 1080 in 1972, but did not ban possession of the substance. In the early 1980s, Compound 1080 was approved for use

in livestock collars, which are allowed a few western states. Ranchers place the collars on livestock to kill predators such as coyotes when the predators bite the neck of a sheep or calf.

According to the Department of Agriculture, the livestock collars killed 27 coyotes in 2001, which is about the yearly average, the letter states.

The odorless, tasteless substance is very difficult to trace in the body, and there is no antidote. Compound 1080 has been identified as a possible chemical warfare agent for addition to water supplies, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation has listed it as a substance that may be sought by terrorists, according to the letter.

"The opportunity for abuse is staggering, and entirely unnecessary, when one considers that it has no legitimate use, except for killing 27 coyotes," according to the letter.

Wigley said it would take a "tremendous" amount of Compound 1080 to reach a lethal level in the water supply.

"It would take more than I've ever produced in one year," he said.

The chemical is organic and biodegrades quickly. Soil tests around the Tull plant have never shown any trace of sodium monofluoroacetate, Wigley said.

Brooks Fahy, executive director of the Oregon wildlife conservation group Predator Defense, visited with a group of local residents and activists on Feb. 21 to increase awareness of Tull Chemical's product.

"We want to muster local concern regarding emergency management and transportation (of Compound 1080)," Fahy said. "All these people commute back and forth between Anniston and Oxford, and 99.9 percent of the public doesn't know (Tull) produces one of the deadliest poisons on earth."

Wigley said there are many other chemicals more deadly than Compound 1080.

Predator Defense has been lobbying against the use of Compound 1080 for nearly two decades. The letter from DeFazio is an important step toward banning the production and possession of the substance, said Brooks Fahy, executive director.

"This creates a record of liability," she said. "Once you're aware of something, you're liable."

Fahy hopes the EPA will eventually outlaw the poison and create an amnesty program, allowing those in possession of Compound 1080 to turn it in without penalty.

Tull Chemical and the houses near it are in a flood zone, which flooded as recently as last May.

DeFazio's letter states that the Federal Emergency Management Agency proposed to buy out and shut down Tull Chemical, but that the plan is on hold.

Wigley said he has never been contacted by FEMA to purchase the property. The plant is built higher than houses in the area, and the production area has never flooded.

A representative from the East Alabama Regional Planning Commission, however,

conducted a survey in the neighborhood to determine interest in a potential buyout of flood-prone homes last year.

East Alabama presented the survey to Oxford. It is up to the city to take the next step and apply for a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant, so currently the process is at a standstill, said Robin Caler, a planner for East Alabama.

Oxford Mayor Leon Smith was out of town Friday and Councilman Johnny Bentley said he did not know about the situation.

Wigley only produces the chemical when he receives an order and he transports it as soon as it is produced. He does not store Compound 1080 at the plant, he said.

What: Sodium fluoroacetate is an odorless and tasteless fine white powder, commonly known as Compound 1080. It is one of the most acutely toxic substances known.

How: The pesticide can cause harm to animals and humans when inhaled, absorbed through the skin or ingested. A dose approximately the equivalent to an aspirin tablet can be lethal when ingested by humans.

Effects: The poison, which can cause neurologic and cardiac damage, starves cells of oxygen by interrupting metabolic processes in the body. Symptoms may begin 30 minutes after ingestion which may include numbness, twitching, vomiting and hallucinations, and lead to death within two hours.

Sources: Occupational Medicine, Third Edition and Dr. Sander Orent of Colorado, who is board certified in occupational, environmental and internal medicine.

Drums sit inside a fence at Tull Chemical in Oxford. Photo: Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

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