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EPA Reopens Comments on Medical Waste Incinerators

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On February 27, 1995, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued proposed performance standards and emission guidelines for new and existing medical waste incinerators, which experts estimated would result in closure of 80% of hospital incinerators.¹ These proposed incinerator standards were part of a long-standing battle between healthcare facilities and the EPA following the release of an EPA report that identified medical waste incinerators as the major source of dioxin pollution. A special panel of experts, convened by the American Hospital Association to respond to the EPA report, showed that medical waste incinerators contributed to 0.2% of the total toxic equivalents and 1.5% of the known sources of dioxin and not 55% as the EPA report claimed.

The EPA made a commitment to reconsider these February 1995 pro-

posed rules, based on new information submitted. On June 20, 1996, the EPA issued a notice of availability of supplemental information and reopening of the comment period to consider the proposed performance standards and emission guidelines for medical waste incinerators.²

Medical waste expert Dr. Nelson Slavik (Environmental Health Management Systems, South Bend, IN) predicts that the EPA's proposed permissible emission levels of HCl (15 ppm) and Dioxin (125 ppm) will make most hospital-based medical waste incinerators economically unfeasible.

"The biggest mistake the EPA is making is that they are still looking at the concentration of the emission chemicals rather than the total volume of emissions," Slavik noted.

The definition of medical waste has been narrowed slightly and is proposed to be similar to the New York State definition of medical waste, which includes cultures and stocks of infectious agents, human pathologic

waste, human blood and blood products, used and unused sharps, and animal waste. The proposal also includes emission testing, and specific training and qualification requirements for incinerator operators.

A public meeting was scheduled to be held on July 10, 1996, in Alexandria, Virginia. Written comments were due on August 8, 1996, at the Air and Radiation Docket Information Center, Attn: Docket No. A-91-61, US EPA, 401 M St SW, Washington, DC 20460.

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