

Dow Apology : Long Overdue

David L. Linhardt, publisher, MDN-Rejected.com May 10, 2005

It's almost that time of the year again – the Annual General Meeting of The Dow Chemical Company. Even if you aren't a stockholder, it's hard not to know about the meeting if you live in the Midland area. The company takes out full-page ads in the local newspapers. Typically, the ad is an "Open Letter to the Community" and details Dow "successes" and "local contributions" with a small dose of "still working hard on this problem" to balance the blowing of trumpets. It's signed by the Chairman of the Board, the CEO, the president and other company executives.

After reading my hometown newspaper this week, I would like to suggest that the company consider adopting a Japanese custom that is rare in the Corporate America culture of today. The custom : a public apology for the deaths caused by a company's action.

 (continue from front page)

On January 8, 2003, Air Midwest Flight 5481 stalled after takeoff and crashed into a hangar at the Charlotte, North Carolina airport. All 19 passengers and the 2 crewmembers perished in the fiery crash. The accident investigation concluded that an egregious maintenance error combined with too much luggage and weight in the back of the plane led to the crash.

A Raleigh, NC newspaper reported that Greg Stevens, the president of Air Midwest apologized for the crash, "Air Midwest and its maintenance provider, Vertex Aerospace, acknowledge deficiencies, which ... contributed to this accident. We are truly sorry, and regret and apologize to everyone affected by this tragic event." The apology was given at a memorial service very close to the crash site attended by about 20 family members and friends.

The apology was not the more spontaneous, more immediate apology given after a tragedy caused by a Japanese company. Mr. Stevens' public apology was part of a settlement agreement between the airline and the parents of 18-year-old Christiana Shephard, a young woman traveling to college from the Azore Islands off Portugal, where her parents are missionaries.

There are very few persons that do not believe that Dow is responsible for the very high levels of dioxins found in Midland and in the Tittabawassee River. The contamination is the result of historic waste practices – chemical waste ponds drained into the river, overloaded chemical waste "tar burners" and incinerators polluting the community.

After many years of denial, the company has "sorta" acknowledged that it is the source of the dioxins present in the Midland area and in the riverside. "Dow has operated in Midland since 1897 ... It is *possible* that the dioxin and dioxin-like substance called furan found in the river from Midland to near Saginaw *could be* from historic Dow processes and waste management practices from Dow's early operations." (Dow Position Statement, November, 2003)

No word yet about accepting responsibility for dioxin contamination in Midland and the surrounding county.

It's very difficult to estimate how many Dow employees have died prematurely due to dioxin exposure. The company began keeping these records about 1940 and dioxins were produced at very high levels long before 1940. In addition, the company's most interesting studies have not been adequately updated for a number of years. The last major update contained a hodgepodge of changes making a comparison with an earlier study impossible.

A reasonable estimate, based on the number of deaths greater than expected, is **142 Dow employees** who may have died from dioxin exposure from 1940 to 1994. Not a large number – less than 3 employees per year. Not a large number unless you happen to be one of the 142 or a relative of one of the prematurely deceased. In this case, perhaps, one premature death is one death too many.

Dow knows the identity of each worker that died earlier than expected – but “privacy” considerations probably prohibit the company from releasing the names. Air Midwest Airlines posted the names of the passengers and crewmembers of Flight 5481 on the internet, but rules must be different in the airline industry.

I do know one name – but he's not included in the 142 employees since his death was never included in a published mortality of dioxin exposed workers. I wonder how many more unrecognized deaths from dioxin have occurred.

Pete Petty was one of my Environmental Services co-workers. Pete was a physical giant of a man but a gentle soul with an easy laugh. His dioxin exposure was probably very high since he worked in close proximity to the Midland plant's chemical waste incinerators, chemical tar ponds and chemical waste landfills. Pete helped to drain and seal some of the chemical tar ponds and was exposed to unknown levels of dioxins carried by the billowing clouds of dust and dirt raised by earth moving equipment.

In 1998, Dow's Legal Department reported that the risk of stomach cancer in one class of dioxin pesticide workers was more than four times that of unexposed workers and that the elevation was statistically significant.

Pete died of stomach cancer a few years ago.

A memorial service might be a bit much for the company – tearful executives do not tend to lead to higher stock prices. However, a company apology, even smaller in size than the usual full-page “open letter”, might be a nice touch from a company that has remained in Midland so it would not lose its small town “sensitivities”.

It's been more than 50 years since the first possible “dioxin death”. Perhaps, an apology is long overdue.

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