

Grace consultant says

TCE continues to flow off Cryovac site

By DAN KENNEDY

BOSTON — Chemical solvents identified as possible carcinogens flow through groundwater off the East Woburn Cryovac plant, toward two contaminated municipal wells, at a rate of one to five gallons per year, a hydrogeologist testified Tuesday.

The movement of contaminants continues even though the owner of the plant, W.R. Grace & Co., says employees stopped using the principal solvent, trichloroethylene (TCE), about 11 years ago.

Steven P. Maslansky, a hydrogeologist hired by Grace to study contamination at the 369 Washington St. facility, testified in the Woburn leukemia trial that there are between five and 100 gallons of organic chemicals such as TCE in groundwater underneath the property.

The main source of contamination, he added, was an indoor storm drain that ran into a ditch behind the plant building, near the southern border of the property.

From there, Maslansky said, chemicals flowed along the natural underground gradient to the southwest corner of the property, with contamination showing up in two monitoring wells off the property that were installed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

He estimated that TCE and a related chemical, 1,2-trans-dichloroethylene, leave the site at the rate of one to five gallons a year.

Maslansky added there is no significant evidence on the Cryovac property of the third chemical cited in the lawsuit against Grace — tetrachloroethylene (PCE).

He said the most likely source of the chemical was hydraulic fluid which leaked from earth-moving equipment used to conduct environmental tests. No more than two and a half ounces of PCE are leaving the property each year, he said.

The plaintiffs in the U.S. District Court trial, eight East Woburn families, contend that the contaminated groundwater

on the Grace site flowed 2,400 feet into drinking water wells G and H, which were closed in 1979 after 15 years of use.

The contaminants caused six

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leukemia deaths and two illnesses, the plaintiffs charge.

But Grace officials insist that, even though some contaminated groundwater has left the Cryovac site, none of it has ever flowed into wells G and H.

Plaintiffs' attorney Jan R. Schlichtmann, during his cross examination of Maslansky, asked the scientist if he was aware that an EPA consultant had traced a "plume of contamination" from wells G and H to the two EPA wells that Maslansky had cited — and that the consultant had identified the source of contamination as being north or northeast of those wells, which would include the Cryovac plant.

Maslansky said he was aware of the EPA report, but added he

was hired only to study the Cryovac property itself, not the source of contamination of wells G and H.

Maslansky's testimony, during direct examination by Grace attorney Michael B. Keating and during cross examination, represented a curious departure from the contentiousness that has been typical in the 62-day-old trial.

In his two days on the witness stand, Maslansky made few statements that differed from the plaintiffs' version of what happened on the Cryovac property during the 1960s and '70s.

Maslansky carefully detailed the groundwater and soil contamination he discovered and outlined a program he has devised to pump out contaminated groundwater, remove the chemical contaminants, and return it to the aquifer.

One of the few sources of controversy Tuesday was Maslansky's estimate of soil permeability on the site.

The permeability issue is crucial to determining how

quickly underground chemicals would flow from Cryovac to wells G and H.

Dr. George Pinder, a hydrogeologist hired by the plaintiffs, has testified that TCE would flow from the property to the wells in three years.

But Maslansky's findings showed that soil on the Cryovac site is considerably less permeable and more compacted than Pinder had assumed.

During cross examination, Maslansky conceded to Schlichtmann that estimating soil permeability is largely a matter of judgment and experience, although flow tests and observation of the soil itself are also important.

Grace is one of two defendants in the trial. The plaintiffs also charge that a property formerly owned by Beatrice Foods Co. was used as a chemical dumping ground, and that groundwater from that site flowed into wells G and H.

The property is part of the Riley Leather Co. tannery, 228 Salem St., which Beatrice owned between 1978 and 1983.