



27 April 1993

Dear Great Lakes Activist:

Attached you will find some briefing notes on the recently released IJC Virtual Elimination Task Force (VETF) Draft Final Report. We hope these notes aid your reading of the documents.

We encourage you to raise these points and others at the VETF meeting to be held in Toronto on **THURSDAY APRIL 29, beginning at 6:30 PM** at the **Harbour Castle Westin Hotel**.

You are also encouraged to attend a "pre-meeting meeting" of environmentalists on **Thursday at 4:30 PM** to be held at the offices of the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), located at **517 College St., Suite 401**. We will discuss issues to be raised at the meeting and eat dinner together (pizza) prior to the VETF meeting.

For further information, contact myself or Sarah Miller at CELA (963-2284).

We look forward to seeing you Thursday.

For a Green and Healthy Planet,

Jay Palter
Chlorine Issues Campaigner

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Notes on
**Virtual Elimination Task Force (VETF)
Draft Final Report (of March 31, 1993)**

by Jack Weinberg and Jay Palter, Greenpeace
April 26, 1993

The Mission of the Virtual Elimination Task Force

What is the mission of the Virtual Elimination Task Force? Is it an arena for debating the validity of IJC recommendations or a forum for formulating proposals on their implementation? To attempt to work by consensus and to do both simultaneously guarantees a confusing result.

The **Draft Final Report (of March 31, 1993)** of the VETF is the product of this confusion. The Draft Report represents an unsuccessful attempt to forge consensus on critical issues where no consensus exists. As such, it fails to clarify the issues in dispute or provide the Commissioners, decision-makers and the public with help in understanding how to move forward in translating the Virtual Elimination goals into public policy. On several issues, where the IJC Sixth Biennial Report was sharp, crisp, and pointed toward action, this draft represents a confusing step backwards.

In contrast, the supplemental report, **Case Study, Application of a Virtual Elimination Strategy to an Industrial Feedstock Chemical: Chlorine**, is clear and concise. It makes a substantive contribution to the discussion of how to implement the IJC's most controversial Sixth Biennial Report recommendations -- No.5, which urges that production processes be altered to prevent the formation of dioxins, furans and hexachlorobenzene, and No.7, which calls for sunseting the use of chlorine and chlorine containing compounds as industrial feedstocks.

The supplemental papers by representatives of Dow Chemical and Georgia Pacific Corporation are equally clear. They articulate reasons why these corporations feel the IJC recommendations should not be implemented.

If there is disagreement or second thoughts on the validity of IJC recommendations, then these need to be resolved. So long as they remain unresolved, the VETF will be used as an arena for debating the validity of the recommendations, instead of being an important forum for discussing their implementation.

Pulp and Paper

The section of the VETF Draft Report with most serious problems is on pages 4-5 & 4-6 titled: "Dioxin in Bleached Pulp Mill Effluents." This section looks at the trend in the paper industry to replace bleach plants using elemental chlorine by bleach plants using chlorine dioxide and praises this as a "success" toward achieving "virtual elimination." The claim on which this "success" is based is that "mills making these changes do not contain detectable quantities of dioxins."

This chain of reasoning is flawed and directly contradicts previous discussion of this subject in the framework of the IJC and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement:

- i) To date, concern has been focused on a broad range of organochlorines that are contaminating the Great Lakes ecosystem as a result of chlorine-based pulp bleaching. The VETF Draft Report narrows this concern to the discharge of a single substance -- dioxin -- and with only one form of dioxin -- TCDD.
- ii) The IJC Sixth Biennial Report tells us that "zero discharge" is the tactic or method to achieve virtual elimination. It explicitly states: "zero discharge does not mean less than detectable." The VETF Draft Report contradicts the IJC position and proposes that "non-detect" should be a measure of success toward the goal of Virtual Elimination.
- iii) Even the claim of non-detect for dioxin, however, is suspect. No reports by government or independent outsiders have been provided to support this claim. Nor do we know which mills -- or what percentage of all mills this claim has been made for.
- iv) The term "non-detect" is meaningless for dioxin without the following information: first, the detection limits of the testing procedure being used; and second, the amount of dilution of effluent permitted prior to testing. State-of-the-art dioxin testing can be performed only by select laboratories and is very expensive. Pulp mill effluent is typically diluted with tens of millions of gallons of fresh water each day -- making detection extremely difficult.
- v) Finally, one way to achieve "non-detect" levels of dioxin in effluent is by media-shifting toxic discharges to sludges that are then landspread, landfilled or incinerated.

This section of the report represents a revision of past IJC policy and should be deleted.

An excellent example of how to relate the goal of Virtual Elimination to the pulp and paper industry appears in the supplemental Case Study on pages 25-27. This text should completely replace the corresponding text in the VETF Draft Report.

In the **Interim Report** released in 1991, the VETF calls on Great Lakes jurisdictions to establish programs and time-tables for the phase-out of chlorine-based bleaching by the paper industry. Exactly one jurisdiction, the province of Ontario, has complied. This positive action must be acknowledged in the VETF final report. Other jurisdictions should be encouraged to follow suit.

Eliminating "Inadvertent" Toxins

IJC Recommendation 5 specifically calls for action to "alter production processes and feedstock chemicals so that dioxins, furans and hexachlorobenzene no longer result as byproducts." The VETF Draft Report does not appear to provide any substantive or useful discussion on steps toward implementation of this recommendation.

The section on "The Decision Making Process," pages 6-14 to 6-19 in the VETF Draft Report, attempts to define a process for achieving Virtual Elimination. The strategy presented is neither appropriate nor useful for eliminating inadvertently produced toxic substances.

If the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement goals of Virtual Elimination and the philosophy of Zero Discharge are to have meaning, they must apply to these and other toxins that are inadvertently produced as byproducts in the course of industrial production, use and disposal of synthetic chemicals. Among all toxins entering the ecosystem, these rank among the most potent and are also among the most poorly controlled. Emerging evidence continues to indicate that human health impacts of dioxins and related compounds are much greater than previously thought.

The approach in the **Case Study** is instructive and should be incorporated into the final report. Noting that dioxins, furans and hexachlorobenzene (and other persistent toxins) are ubiquitous byproducts of chlorine chemistry, the **Case Study** takes as its starting point an examination of the entire chlorine use-tree. Instead of looking at individual chemical end-products, it examines the industrial processes that produce and use these chemicals.

Failure of the VETF Draft Report

Task Force members, consultants and IJC staff clearly put serious work and effort into the VETF Draft Report. Much of it can still be put to good use. The final report, however, needs significant revisions:

- i) The IJC Sixth Biennial Report provides a clear and precise definition of the term Zero Discharge:

"Zero discharge means just that: halting all inputs from all human sources and pathways to prevent any opportunity for persistent toxic substances to enter the environment as a result of human activity." (pp. 16-17)

Instead of taking this definition as a starting point, the VETF Draft Report muddies the water by referring to Zero Discharge as a "rather imprecise concept" and claiming "detailed definition remains controversial." A more accurate statement of the controversy surrounding Zero Discharge might have read: "Some Task Force members disagree with the philosophy of zero discharge as it has been interpreted and defined by the IJC in its Sixth Biennial Report."

ii) In general, the VETF Draft Report suffers from a lack of precision and clarity that results from attempting to create on paper a consensus between stakeholders where no consensus exists in the world.

iii) The VETF Draft Report is paralyzed in its attempt to come to terms with the concept of Virtual Elimination as it applies to industrial production, use and disposal of organochlorines. The supplemental papers show the reasons why this happened. The differences between the views expressed in the Case Study and those expressed in the accompanying papers by Dow and Georgia Pacific leave little ground for an honest consensus.

Conclusion

The difficulties in the VETF Draft Report reflect the attempt to simultaneously carry out two important but incompatible activities.

On the one hand, further debate and discussion on the validity of the IJC's Sixth Biennial Recommendations is needed. The IJC can and should provide an open and public forum in which this debate can continue. Implementation of these recommendations require full airing of the issues still in dispute.

However, work must proceed detailing how IJC recommendations can be implemented and exploring how to optimize technical, social and economic implications.

By attempting to carry out both activities in a single, consensus process, the VETF did justice to neither. Instead, the IJC should provide a framework where these two important goals can proceed, but on separate tracks.