The state of California and the U.S. Justice Department have reached a tentative settlement with Montrose Chemical Corp. to settle a 10-year old natural resources lawsuit. Montrose was accused of dumping the pesticide DDT into sewers that empty into the Pacific Ocean a mile or two from Montrose's southern California factory.

The dumping allegedly occurred from the time its plant opened in 1947 until about 1971, leaving more than 100 tons of DDT spread over a 17-square-mile underwater Superfund site off the cliffs of Palos Verdes.

DDT, which accumulates in animal tissues and spreads through the food chain, has been banned in the United States since 1972. Keith Takata, director of EPA's California Superfund division, called the contaminated Palos Verdes shelf "one of the worst hazardous waste sites in the country."

In light of the preliminary settlement, a U.S. District Court judge in Los Angeles earlier this month ordered the parties to submit a settlement agreement to the court by mid-December and ordered the parties not to talk about the settlement.

The federal and state governments did not specify how much they were seeking in damages to clean up the site, but estimates range from $47 million to $170 million.

Lawyers Defend Company Actions

Attorneys representing Montrose and several co-defendants said Montrose dumped the DDT into county sewers. Now the pesticide lies on the ocean floor. But they argued it was not illegal to do so at the time, that DDT can be found everywhere off the coast of California, and that federal and state officials have no proof Montrose DDT has caused any harm.

EPA in August launched an unprecedented experiment to cap several square miles of the DDT contamination with a thick layer of sand and silt dredged from the nearby Long Beach harbor. If the experiment works, EPA hopes to begin a massive construction effort in 2002 to cover three or four square miles of the Superfund site.

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