Olin Prepares for Mercury Free Future

ROB PAVEY,The Augusta Chronicle

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — On a cool October morning in 1965, more than 300 people gathered to hear Georgia Gov. Carl Sanders dedicate Olin Chemical's modern new chlor-alkali plant near Augusta.

Completed in just 14 months, the $20 million complex was already in full production, using mercury cells as a catalyst to churn out 220 tons per day of chlorine bound for textile and paper plants.

Today, the site Sanders hailed as a key part of "Georgia's chemical empire" is known as one of the last places in the U.S. where now-obsolete mercury technology remains in use.

This fall, after 47 years, that process comes to an end in Augusta as its parent company invests $160 million to consolidate its chlorine production at a plant in Charleston, Tenn., where new technology will eliminate the controversial use of mercury.

The changes cap a decade-long campaign by environmental groups to call attention to mercury contamination issues that were mostly unknown — and unregulated — when the plant opened.

The Augusta plant's status as one of just four that still use mercury to make chlorine took a toll on Olin's business, the company's management acknowledged in an April earnings statement.

"We based our decision to convert and reconfigure on several factors," the report said, citing "a steady increase in the number of customers unwilling to accept our products manufactured using mercury cell technology" and pending legislation that limits recycling options for waste mercury.

Although the Augusta plant will continue to make bleach for local customers, the chlorine equipment — and about 200 tons of waste mercury — will be removed, and the process buildings will be razed.

"We are considerably downsizing our operation and will cease to manufacture chlorine, caustic soda and hydrogen," said Elaine Patterson, Olin's government relations director.

The changes in Augusta, while welcomed by groups that have lobbied for the abolition of mercury cell technology, will result in fewer jobs and fewer property tax dollars.

The plant that once employed about 100 workers will soon need just 21 employees

to operate the reconfigured facility.

"All employees were offered positions at other Olin facilities," Patterson said. "Twenty-two have chosen to relocate."

An additional 17 workers chose to retire and 16 were laid off, with both groups offered severance packages.

Olin places a high value on its workers, she added, and is providing job placement assistance to those laid off.

The plant's current annual property tax is about $330,000, down from $500,000 a few years ago, due to decreasing assets at the site.

The changes, however, will also bring benefits to the environment and to public health, said Jackie Savitz, a senior scientist and campaign director for the environmental group Oceana.

"Olin is the last of the big guys, so this is huge," she said, noting that 95 percent of U.S. chlorine is already made with mercury-free technology.

At the time Olin's two plants cease using mercury, only two similar sites — PPG Industries in West Virginia and Ashta Chemicals in Ohio — will remain, while about 115 others have been converted to cleaner processes. "Those last two are also the smallest in terms of mercury use," she said.

Although the use of mercury in manufacturing will end later this year, the impacts of its use are likely to linger for decades.

"Obviously, 200 tons of mercury is a lot," said John Fonk, the coordinator of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's remedial sites unit, which oversees Olin's hazardous waste and related operations. Company officials are in the final steps of submitting a plan for removing unwanted mercury from the site.

"They would be required to follow industry standards for disposing of or recycling that material," he said.

The plant's decommissioning is also of interest to regulators because of related contamination issues.

"They have been cleaning up a number of aspects at that site since the 1980s, and will probably continue to do so, because they have contaminated groundwater," he said. Such monitoring and cleanup efforts are common at sites where chlor-alkali processing used mercury for many years.

The end of chlorine production in Augusta will also eliminate Olin's stream of hazardous waste, whose shipment to out-of-state disposal sites is supervised by the state.

"The process creates a waste sludge and hazardous waste from filter press operations," Fonk said. "So there would be no more mercury-contaminated waste to be shipped away."

Olin's vast acreage off Doug Barnard Parkway is part of the legacy of one of the region's most successful economic development campaigns, launched in the late 1950s by a group known as the "Committee of 100."

In those years, Augusta was a Southern city with little more than a river and a railroad, but with the backing of the committee and support from the Governor's Office, Olin became one of many industrial giants lured to the area.

Among the others were Monsanto, Continental Can and Procter & Gamble, followed by DuPont, Babcock & Wilcox, Nipro and Columbia Nitrogen.

In a 1965 cover story about Olin in Chemical Week magazine, reprinted in The Augusta Chronicle that year, the headline said it all: "In Peach Land, a new Empire of Chemicals."

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