The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) predicts that Americans could suffer 40 million cases of skin cancer and 800,000 cancer deaths in the next 88 years because of depletion of atmospheric ozone. Chlorofluorocarbons, which are manufactured gases used as refrigerants and foams outside the U.S., break down the ozone in the upper atmosphere which acts as a shield to keep out harmful ultraviolet radiation from the sun. (At ground level, ozone itself is a dangerous pollutant, harmful to vegetation and to human lungs; in the upper atmosphere it filters out the sun’s most powerful and cancer-causing rays, protecting the earth and its inhabitants.)

The agency based its prediction on a continuation of current trends, so the estimates of skin cancer incidence and cancer deaths contain a wide margin of error. The agency said if the use of chlorofluorocarbons is reduced, the projected risks would be lowered by 90%, but with faster growth in their use, cancer risks would rise four-fold. The risk assessment still must be reviewed by additional EPA scientists and may be revised. The agency said if the assessment is supported by the review, immediate controls would have to be placed on the production of chlorofluorocarbons. The EPA assessment also said that increasing ultraviolet radiation on the earth would lead to more problems with the human immune system and eye cataracts, rising losses of crops and forest products and reduced aquatic resources. The Reagan Administration, which previously said more study was needed, planned to propose to a conference of industrialized nations in Geneva late in 1986 that a global "near-term freeze" be put on chlorofluorocarbons.

--Peter Montague

FACING $1.6 BILLION CLEANUP TAB, NJ DEVELOPS ITS FUNDING SOURCES

NJ residents in November, 1986, approved a $200 million bond issue that will allow the state to begin a $1.6 billion cleanup program for the state's worst toxic waste sites. NJ has more sites than any other state--97 sites--on the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "national priorities list" of 812 sites nationwide.

The NJ Legislature passed companion bills to raise $535 million over a 5-year period. In addition, the state expects to get $500 million from the federal Superfund and another $500 million from industries found to be responsible for the pollution. At the 600 worst toxic waste sites in the state, 371 of the responsible parties have been identified and will be required to pay for cleanup. The state plans to clean up the remaining 229 with public funds. The Lipari landfill in Gloucester County is at the top of the national priority list, making it the worst toxic waste site in the nation.

A state assistant environmental protection commissioner said NJ hopes to have cleanup projects well under way at 15 sites by the end of 1988, now that the federal Superfund has been reauthorized.

--Peter Montague

VERMONT ELECTRIC COOP RAISES ITS RATES 40% TO PAY FOR ATOM POWER

The future of the Vermont Electric Cooperative, formed with 10,500 rural customers that private companies refused to serve, is being threatened by the failure of nuclear reactors in which it invested. The federal government loaned the co-op $67 million to invest in power plants. According to the VT Public Advocate, the co-op invested in every failed nuclear plant in New England, including 5 that have been canceled and Seabrook 1 (NH), whose costs exceeded original estimates by billions of dollars. To try to pay for its nuclear commitments, the co-op has raised its rates 40% in less than a year; electric rates are now 50% above the state average and are threatening to rise higher.

--Peter Montague

RACHEL DATABASE NOW CONTAINS DATA ON 1058 TOXIC CHEMICALS

The Rachel database now contains detailed information about 1058 toxic chemicals. The information is derived from the U.S. Coast Guard's CHRIS Manual, which stands for Chemical Hazard Response Information System. The Coast Guard developed the Manual for use by its personnel when called to respond to chemical emergencies. The 1058 chemicals include all the common chemicals found polluting the environment today.

The Rachel database, which is accessible to the public free, is a full-text searching system; every word in every document is indexed. Thus if a user asks for information on "arsenic trioxide," the computer will show all documents that contain the chemical name arsenic trioxide, including the section on arsenic trioxide from the CHRIS Manual.

--Peter Montague

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