

Eradicating ‘miracles of science’

Before I get to this column’s subject, more on PFAS. I would ask that you indulge me for a moment on a reflection that occurred at the recent AWA Global Release Liner Conference in Denver. The reflection struck me when reading a Richard Rohr meditation, which started with this:

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is always saying that you’ve got to balance your knowing with a willingness not to know. The mind of itself, the brain in itself, is incapable of wisdom. It’s only at an experiential level of existence that we know something, but that knowing is not subject to telling. I think that’s why we don’t like it. It gives us no ego rewards. We can’t prove it. We can’t measure it. We can’t convince anyone else that we’re right.

Was I right in trying to understand why major paper manufacturers won’t invest in “specialty paper” manufacturing in North America? The “balance of my knowledge with a willingness not to know” just jumped out at me. Why is the paper industry investing millions and millions in Uruguay and Brazil and not in North America? We have trees and water. We can’t quite match the growth cycle of eucalyptus, but our southern pine grows pretty darn quickly and we have plenty of northern bleached softwood kraft (NBSK) to create an appropriate furnish. Why don’t these guys get it?

We are at a critical junction in the supply of specialties to our industry. North America has closed or converted thousands of tons of specialty, reducing supply and making us more and more dependent on offshore supply. Offshore supply is not a sustainable long-term solution, in my opinion. It is affected by huge price swings, labor conflicts, container shortages, energy fluctuations, and so on. Why won’t the industry invest here?

This really isn’t about my ego, contrary to the above. It’s really a serious reflection of what the current dynamic might create. If you go back to the early 1900s, the major newspapers – the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, all of them, worried about newsprint supply. Their solution: control their supply! They all made major investments in newsprint manufacturing. If the specialty paper folks here in the US don’t wake up, don’t invest in domestic manufacturing, I predict the very same dynamic will occur.

The OEMs – Avery, 3M, Mactac, and others – will form a consortium and go into the specialty business themselves. Right now, they are held hostage and that won’t work long term. I know this sounds like heresy. I know it is a bit dramatic, but major consumers of specialty paper have to be less dependent on foreign supply. This was a reflection on messaging from the paper industry at AWA, and it didn’t work for me. I know I’ll get responses from some of you, but I’m prepared to take the heat. We need major investment here in North America in specialties.

Okay, I feel better and can get on with the topic of the day, PFAS, the acronym for perfluoroalkyl or polyfluoroalkyl. Finally there is a change about to occur in regulation that affects all of us here in the US. Europe, as usual, is way ahead of the US. Washington has finally recognized that PFAS chemistry, PFOS (perfluoro octane sulfuric acid), and PFOA (perfluoro octane acid) are threats to human health and the environment.

The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has proposed a national drinking water standard for six types of “forever chemicals.” The proposal includes PFOS and PFOA chemistry. It sets a limit of four parts per trillion, an amount the EPA said is the lowest at which these chemicals can be detected. This means that Scotchgard and Teflon chemistry (3M and DuPont) will finally be regulated. The incongruity here, at least it seems to me, is what about what we can’t detect? Is it possible that three parts per trillion could cause a health issue? In other words, why don’t we just ban the manufacturing of PFAS, PFOS, and PFOA? I guess that’s too simple, right!? (Having said that, 3M has announced it will cease PFAS chemistry manufacturing by 2025 so I need to be fair, I guess).

While all of this legislation is proposed, it is anticipated that approval could be enacted by the end of the year. EPA administrator Michael Regan says, “This is a tremendous step forward. While there is more work to be done,” the public comment period will allow us “to put it into action as soon as possible.”

Well, it couldn’t happen soon enough, in my view. We have detected these forever chemicals in human blood for years and haven’t done anything about it. In an earlier column I wrote about the lawsuits against a DuPont manufacturing facility in West Virginia. Does it take death and human suffering to finally get industry and government to make change?

Here’s what Michael Hawthorne of the *Chicago Tribune* reported in his piece regarding the EPA announcement:

“Today we can celebrate a huge victory for public health in this country,” says Rob Bilott, a Cincinnati attorney who launched the scrutiny of forever chemicals with lawsuits he filed against DuPont in Ohio and West Virginia during the 2000s.

“It has taken far too long to get to this point,” Bilott says. “But the scientific facts and truth about the health threat posed by these man-made poisons have finally prevailed over the decades of corporate cover-ups and misinformation campaigns designed to mislead the public and delay action.”

Hawthorne continues, and I’m now paraphrasing, 3M had secret documents that were found by attorney Bilott and the Minnesota attorney general that show top executives at 3M knew about the harmful effects of forever chemistry as early as the 1950s. 3M didn’t tell the EPA about what it knew about PFOS and PFOA until 1998. 3M and DuPont called the chemicals “miracles of science.” The really sad part about this story is the lack of transparency and the dishonesty. Just remember these chemistries have been in our water tables, in the Great Lakes, in our utilities at levels we couldn’t measure for years. So, yes, you and I, we are carrying forever chemicals in our bodies today.

During my review and analysis of the PFAS forever chemical story, I found that one state had addressed the issue long before the others: naturally, California! California has passed house bills on everything you can imagine, from outlawing single use plastic bags, to compacting legislation in state-owned facilities, to maximizing recycled content in plastic and paper products, etc.

You can say what you want about no fossil driven automobiles by 2035 and a required high percentage of renewable energy, but their initiatives drive change. Watch what happens to “matrix to the landfill” as they develop their EPR legislation. An OEM might get a call from a converter telling them to come get “their” matrix! Wow!

In their recycling content legislation, AB793, it is noted that “plastics may not contain any percentage of PFAS substances above 100 parts per million or any intentionally added PFAS.” Wow!

Further, in October of 2021, AB1200, signed by the governor, bans the sale of food packaging that has in any way been derived from a substance where PFAS chemistry is used because of functional or technical features. Wow again!

Our world is getting smaller. Our world is becoming more fragile. Our world population continues to grow.

Everyone – corporations and governments and private enterprise – must use common sense as we develop technologies that make us better and more efficient and more circular.

The PFAS story is something that never should have happened. May our industry develop technology and strategies that enhance our well-being, not the other way around.

Another Letter from the Earth **LNW**



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