Health Risk Assessments: Opportunities and Pitfalls

Dennis J. Paustenbach*

I. Introduction

To fulfill my role in this symposium, I will discuss the regulated community's thoughts regarding current approaches to health risk assessments conducted by regulatory agencies within the United States. It might be more appropriate to say that I will discuss some of the scientific shortcomings which have crept into the practice of risk assessment and how regulatory agencies and scientists are working to overcome them. These shortcomings, more often than not, force risk assessments to overstate the likely human health risks associated with exposure to low levels of environmental pollutants.[1]

Environmental consulting firms typically serve the regulated community and its lawyers, solving problems involving contaminated soil, contaminated groundwater, airborne emissions, or a need for an operating permit. Generally, the chemicals are carcinogens, developmental or reproductive toxicants, or are highly persistent in the environment. The firms are frequently at odds with a regulatory agency. Also, they are often involved in litigation over the degree of necessary clean-up. More often than not, personal injury claims have been filed which allege that health has been or is likely to be affected due to exposure to contaminated soil, air, or water. The consulting firm's role is to assist corporations and their attorneys by developing a more thorough, balanced and therefore, credible health risk assessment than that put forward by the government or a plaintiff's attorney.

1. Ames, *Six Common Errors Relating to Environmental Pollution*, 7 Reg. Toxicol. & Pharm. 379, 380 (1987).