



Tons of Toxic Chemicals Above

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'2.4 BILLION Pounds of Toxic Chemicals Poured into Air," recent headlines read. After two decades of major pollution-control efforts and hundreds of billions of dollars spent on reducing discharges, people are shocked to learn that the quantities of toxic chemicals being dumped into the atmosphere are measured in billions of pounds per year.

Twenty thousand facilities have reported their inventories and omissions to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under Title III of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA) of 1986. The detailed reports give the first comprehensive picture of the use and emissions of these toxic chemicals.

At the local level, how should mayors, community leaders, and concerned individuals interpret a report that their local "Chemco" plant is discharging 1,100 pounds of chemical Q? Will they react differently if the reported discharge is 500 kilograms? Should Chemco be closed?

At the national level, how should Congress and the EPA react to this number? Worse news will appear in a few weeks with

the reports on the total amounts of toxic chemicals being dumped into waterways, on land, and in waste dumps.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the shock, Congress deserves praise for this "right to know" law. The process of putting together these reports has led some companies to decide that they must do more to curtail discharges. Monsanto, for example, has announced a goal of reducing overall discharges by 90 percent before 1993 - after discovering that its plants discharged 370 million pounds of these chemicals into the air, water, and waste dumps last year.

Despite the large amounts of discharges, we expect that analyses based on the reports will reveal few cases where the discharge poses an immediate threat to health. Not all 320 chemicals are equally harmful, and release doesn't necessarily lead to exposure. Chemicals may be diluted or transformed so that they are not harmful when people are exposed. All modern economies produce large quantities of toxic materials that could leak, or must be disposed of, into the environment.

Congress and EPA have been trying to balance the potential dangers of these discharges against the social benefit of having the use of the chemicals. Now business, government agencies, and concerned citizens have the data to examine the total discharges into their neighborhoods. Dis-

ease and a despoiled environment are not necessary prices for a high standard of living; these data and follow-up risk analyses are needed to determine where to focus attention and resources.

The EPA has done an exemplary job in assembling these reports and making them available to the public and government. The agency is at work on a "risk-screening guide" to help citizens decide which discharges are of greatest concern.

Even for plants in full compliance with current standards, the regulations may not be satisfactory, for at least three major reasons:

1. Current laws regulate discharges into air or water or do not directly address total discharges. The regulatory officials responsible for each program have no authority over discharges into other media and often ignore them in order to attain their own program's objectives. For example, a common method of ridding ground water of organic chemicals is "air stripping," whereby volatile compounds are expelled into the air. Air stripping makes ground water cleaner but does nothing to lower the amount of toxicants in the environment.

2. Various laws exempt government facilities, some of which are among the worst polluters. Toxic chemicals from government facilities are just as lethal as those from private-sector facilities!

3. Most legislation "grandfathers" existing facilities, allowing them to continue discharging large quantities of toxicants, in contrast to stringent standards for new facilities. Grandfathering encourages companies to keep the less productive, dirty facilities operating long after they were scheduled to be modernized.

An immediate, constructive response is needed to this report, as has occurred for some major chemical companies. "Chemical awareness and emergency response" programs have begun to open meaningful dialogues among companies and local and federal government regulators in many communities. Public participation, however, has been meager.

We urge President Bush, with the support of Congress, to resolve the problems in pollution-control policies and direct the EPA and other agencies to identify and reduce the risks to health and the environment. The US must choose and implement cost-effective ways to reduce the total discharge of pollutants into the environment. Our health, our ecosystem, and our economy depend on our success.

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