

One of the most important tools for public access to environmental health information is in danger of being badly gutted, if not made all but useless. The Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) is the most complete, publicly-available database of toxic emissions into our air, water, and land. The Inventory is important because it includes both unregulated emissions (which may pose threats of cancer, asthma, or other health problems) and regulated emissions (which may pose less threat).

Federal regulation provides that the nation's 24,000 industrial plants annually report to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the amounts of some 650 toxic chemicals they handle. They give EPA numerical estimates of how many pounds of each chemical they manufacture, process, or use. They also report how much they legally recycle or dispose of on-site or off-site, and how much they otherwise emit into the air, land, or water.

The TRI data is available on-line, and people use it to assess what threats a particular industrial facility may present to workers at a plant, or residents in the surrounding community. The TRI data has also been a favorite tool of news reporters since EPA began publishing the Inventory in 1988,. Thousands of stories over the years have spotlighted which companies are cleaning up their acts -- and which are not.

Although many companies must collect this data for other reasons, the EPA in 1994 agreed to create a "short form" that would reduce what the industry claimed was a paperwork "burden." This granted companies a waiver on reporting data on any chemical whose self-reported use fell below certain thresholds.

Then, last October 4, EPA announced that it intended to take two actions that would further curtail the amount of toxics data reported to EPA, and consequently made public. First, it sent notice to Congress that starting in late 2006 it would no longer release its Toxics Inventory annually. Instead, the report would come out every other year. Second, it gave notice that it would loosen the chemical-use thresholds that determined whether companies could use the short Form A. Environmental groups, using EPA data, have estimated that this change would cause people living in 922 zip codes to lose *all* statistical information now available on local toxic chemical releases. People in another 1,608 zip codes would lose at least *half* of the data currently available to them.

No one disputes that the public disclosure of toxic chemical release information has had an impact. Companies have reduced their toxic emissions drastically -- by as much as 60 percent over the life of the program. That reduction was the intent of the law, adopted two years after the 1984 Bhopal, India, chemical disaster that killed thousands. The compilation of an annual inventory of toxic chemicals was an alternative industry agreed to in place of a far more costly and burdensome federal regulation that was discussed at the time. Now industry wants out of the agreement and the EPA has agreed.

Many members of The Society of Environmental Journalists use TRI information regularly in their reporting. One such report was the recent Associated Press' feature series "Unhealthy Air." The series, which began last Dec. 13, prompted local stories in scores of newspapers and on TV stations around the country. It would not been possible to present that story without TRI data.

SEJ's detailed objection and formal comments to the EPA's rulemaking is attached along with a CJOG letter joining in support of their petition. Please let me know if your organization would like to join in signing the CJOG letter.