

An Introduction to the Data

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been collecting toxic chemical release information data since 1988 on the TRI database, the first publicly accessible environmental database in the world. TRI is also the first to cut across environmental media, providing information on releases into the air, water, and soil and off-site transfers of toxic chemicals. Release information is available for over 300 different chemicals and 20 chemical categories from 23,000 facilities, for a total of over 225,000 reports from all three reporting years. TRI has been instrumental in generating new pollution prevention initiatives by focusing attention on specific facilities and in developing new environmental laws and regulations (including the recently passed amendments to the U.S. Clean Air Act), water quality standards, and air toxics regulations in various states. Now that three years of data are available, trends in transfers and emissions of chemicals can be analyzed. Such information as the increases and decreases of carcinogens on a state, county, or even facility level can be extracted to provide officials and the public with the most complete emissions trends available.

I want to welcome you to this international conference on the Toxics Release Inventory. I have been involved in working on TRI now for almost four and a half years, and I want to share some of the lessons we have learned. We also look forward to hearing your concerns and issues during the breakout sessions.

My presentation will give a brief overview of the issues that are related to data management. In the later sessions, we will give more details about how we built the database and all of its implications. I want to spend more time giving you illustrations of how these data can be used to challenge your thinking as you listen to the other speakers and think about how to use this information in your country.

One of the main points that makes the TRI very different from any other database in the United States is that the law specifically mandates that data be collected and made publicly accessible, which has set a precedent for information policy in the United States. After enactment of

this law, older regulations were amended and other laws are now being considered with similar provisions so the public will have more access to information.

As Mary Ellen Weber pointed out, the TRI is the first multimedia database that contains water, air, land, storage, and offsite information; therefore, it is unique. Many other databases exist in the United States, but this is the only one explicitly mandated to be publicly available.

Scope of the TRI

The scope of the program, as has been reported, is annual. So far, we have received nearly 85,000 reports per year. Three years of the data are now publicly available in a computer on-line system and in many other products, such as compact disks, diskettes, and papers. A significant amount of data is processed each year. Each form has about 60 data elements with a fairly large amount