

A Public Interest Group Perspective

Gerald V. Poje

*Green Seal
Washington, D.C.*

ABSTRACT

In the information age, gathering and sharing data can be a powerful incentive for environmental improvement. Since 1988, the Toxics Release Inventory has altered American business, government, and public perceptions of toxic emissions. Armed with a ready-made, multimedia schedule of high priority chemicals and emission points, corporations, EPA, and state agencies have pursued a new pollution prevention agenda. Public and private partnerships, such as the 33/50 project, seek accelerated emissions reductions by using this national toxic chemical accounting system. States have approved toxics-use reduction audits and created pollution prevention institutes. Congress has passed additional toxic information provisions through the Pollution Prevention Act of 1990, and a Right-to-Know-More proposal now awaits debate before the current session.

Introduction

In September 1990, an international conference convened in Veszprem, Hungary, to discuss emergency planning for, response to, and prevention of chemical accidents. At that meeting, non-governmental organizations met in a side session to develop a policy dealing with chemical information. Representatives from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia later signed the 10-point agreement (Table 1) that focused on every citizen's right to be notified about and gather verified information on chemical substances, including quantities processed, stored, and used; specific management of these substances; effects to health and environment; accidents involving these chemical substances; routine emissions; and waste production from privately and government-controlled industrial activities.

These broad-based positions are held by many people operating in the public interest who are trying to alleviate chemical contamination

around the globe. In the United States, the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) has been key to mobilizing enormous public interest about toxic chemical problems.

Background

In the mid-1970s and on into the early 1980s, numerous abandoned hazardous waste sites were polluting communities across the United States. The resulting problems stimulated Congress to address this issue and, in 1980, it passed the Superfund Law, which created a fund to assist in the cleanup of these abandoned waste sites. By the end of the five-year term of that federal statute, the enormous groundswell of public dissatisfaction with the pace of the cleanup provoked Congress to revise the Superfund Law in 1986.

However, that reauthorization was informed by other events. Most notably, in 1984, the news of the tragic chemical release in Bhopal, India, had struck home in the United States, as investigations took place to find out how American