

An Industry Perspective on Reporting Releases of Toxic Chemicals

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ABSTRACT

The Toxics Release Inventory has created a valuable accounting system for emissions from selected facilities in the United States. These publicly available data have prompted companies to voluntarily set priorities and establish emissions reductions goals. The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act is an excellent starting point, but it is not without problems. Care must be taken to use the Toxics Release Inventory appropriately, on a sound scientific basis, and set priorities to improve these data.

Introduction

The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA) is a valuable law. For the first time, certain industrial manufacturers are required to quantify and publicly announce emissions of specific chemicals, including releases to the environment and shipments of waste to off-site facilities for treatment, storage, or disposal. These manufacturers must submit a Toxic Chemical Release Inventory (TRI) report to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) every year. EPA then compiles that information into a national computerized database that is publicly accessible in libraries, at governmental offices, and on-line through a computer. The manufacturer's efforts to compile data and the use of this information by manufacturers, regulatory agencies, and the public have been generally beneficial. The system is imperfect; it can be misused, but its mere existence has revolutionized environmental reporting.

TRI's Uses

Investigation and Measurement

Even without public accessibility, determining the total releases and transfers for a plant's toxics chemical release inventory is useful. For the first time, engineers have had to scrutinize their processes as a whole and quantify wastes released to all media. As an investigative and measurement tool, this multimedia inventory has helped provide a baseline of certain toxics releases and, in some cases, has revealed valuable information for process improvements that otherwise might not have received adequate attention.

Planning

As a planning tool, the TRI provides manufacturers with an excellent base to determine priorities for improvement and offers a starting