

## Toxic confusion: a thousand points of ... dirt?

By **Jill Hahn** / Special To The Tab

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**D**o you think you ought to be able to find out what toxic chemicals are being released in your community?

So did the U.S. government after the 1984 Bhopal disaster, when chemicals released from a Union Carbide plant in India killed thousands of people. That's when the Toxics Release Inventory program was created. The TRI program requires companies and federal facilities of a certain size to provide annual reports of their releases of toxic chemicals to the Environmental Protection Agency, which then makes the information available to the public.

For example, let's look at our own county, Middlesex County. The TRI informs us that from 1988 to 2002 (the period for which reports are available), Middlesex County scored in the top 20 percent of dirtiest counties in the U.S. for pounds released into the air of recognized carcinogens, developmental toxicants, and reproductive toxicants on the TRI list (Scorecard: the Pollution Information site, <http://www.scorecard.org/env-releases>). Useful information.

However, the EPA now seems to be backing away from its almost twenty-year commitment to keeping the public well-informed about toxic chemicals. It has recently proposed three changes to TRI reporting (<http://www.epa.gov/tri/>):

1. Move from annual reporting to every-other-year reporting. But many facilities show huge shifts in emissions from year to year, so every-other-year reporting could be misleading.

2. Allow facilities to release 10 times as much pollution before being required to report. This provision would raise the maximum Annual Reportable Amount from 500 to 5,000 pounds.

3. Permit facilities to withhold details on low-level production of persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic chemicals like mercury, lead, and dioxin. But PBT chemicals, which the EPA has identified as "chemicals of special concern," can travel long distances, remain dangerous for long periods of time, and are particularly harmful to children and developing fetuses.

Why do these changes matter? Federal and state policy makers need access to adequate information in order to make decisions that protect our health, safety, and environment. Every regulatory program at the EPA relies on the TRI for data on specific toxic chemicals released to the environment. These data need to be as accurate (able to track the year-to-year variability) and comprehensive (requiring reporting on chemicals of special concern) as possible.

The EPA, in announcing its proposed changes, only cites as its rationale for the changes the burden reporting places on industry (<http://www.epa.gov/tri/>). It does not offer any health justification, or show any evidence that less than 5000 pounds of toxic output annually is not harmful to the environment. Is the lightening of this reporting

burden, which the EPA itself says has been made significantly less costly through improvements in reporting software, a trade-off that benefits the public?

The comment period for the TRI Burden Reduction Proposed Rule extends until January 13, 2006. If you are interested in learning more, a good place to start is the web site of the Union of Concerned Scientists, ([http://ucsaction.org/campaign/11\\_30\\_05\\_toxic\\_release\\_inventory/explanation](http://ucsaction.org/campaign/11_30_05_toxic_release_inventory/explanation)), or the EPA's web site, (<http://www.epa.gov/tri/>).

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