

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#159 - How To Protect Your Neighborhood

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What can you do in your neighborhood to reduce the dangers posed by storage and release of toxic chemicals? Several new reports, and some tactics developed by neighborhood activists, point the way.

Back in 1986--even before we had an effective federal right-to-know law--Carol Steinsapir and others at the Community Environmental Health Center at Hunter College in New York City began investigating chemical use and storage in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Their 1989 report, *Hazardous Neighbors?* is a model of careful research and useful recommendations. It shows how good research can provide a community with tools and weapons for protecting themselves.

Greenpoint-Williamsburg is a community of 142,000 people, 60% of them blue collar and semiskilled workers. Twelve percent of the property in Greenpoint-Williamsburg is zoned for manufacturing, and there are 778 industrial firms doing business there; the remainder is residential, public works, and roads. Homes and factories stand side-by-side in Greenpoint-Williamsburg, allowing people to walk to work or commute only short distances. This saves money, increases leisure time, and allows people to shop locally, which keeps money in the neighborhood economy. However, it carries risks as well because many firms use and store hazardous chemicals on-site.

Stored chemicals represent considerable hazards; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that somewhere between 9 and 11 chemical accidents occur each day in the U.S. (NY TIMES 10/3/85, pg. 1). Even routine leaks and releases can be substantial; for example, beneath a Mobil Oil refinery in Greenpoint-Williamsburg, there is a pool of 14.5 million gallons of oil in the ground, moving slowly toward the ocean. And a 60,000-gallon gasoline spill from a Mobil pipeline beneath a street in Greenpoint-Williamsburg in April, 1988, created serious threats of explosion in the municipal sewer lines.

A report like this one has many uses. People take it to their local zoning board and ask for the most dangerous chemicals (phosgene gas, for example) to be made illegal in heavily residential parts of town. They take it to public meetings when new chemical users try to move into the neighborhood: "Enough is enough!" they say--and they have the evidence to make a strong case. They use it as the basis for further investigations of hazards in the neighborhood. They use it to confront polluters directly, to demand the right to inspect facilities, to meet face to face with big chemical users to express their concern and to ask for detailed emergency response plans, and plans for phasing out the most dangerous chemicals. They use it to make alliances with local fire fighters who, after all, have their lives on the line when fighting chemical fires.

Since Ms. Steinsapir and her colleagues began their research, a new federal law has become effective. It is well known as "the federal right to know law" but it has features that many people still don't know about. In addition to requiring big chemical users to reveal their releases of chemicals into the neighborhood (under Section 313), this law also requires companies to report what quantities of chemicals they store in the neighborhood (under Section 312). The U.S. EPA has developed a list of 366 "extremely hazardous substances" and "threshold planning quantities" (TPQs); any company storing any of the 366 chemicals in quantities greater than the TPQ for that chemical must report to the government. Furthermore, the company is supposed to evaluate what kind of hazard it represents to the surrounding community and to describe on paper what steps it has taken to minimize those hazards. There is supposed to be an organization in your state--and perhaps in your neighborhood--that is collecting this information from companies and they are supposed to make it available to you.

The Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (CCHW) has recently published a booklet on this federal right to know law, how it works, and how you can use it. This is the best, most practical guide to the federal right to know law that we have seen. The

emphasis is on making this important new law useful in your local battle to keep your neighborhood safe.

Here's a small library of recent publications to help you protect your neighborhood:

Carol Steinsapir and others, *HAZARDOUS NEIGHBORS?* (New York, NY: Community Environmental Health Center [Hunter College School of Health Sciences, 425 East 25th St., Box 596, NY, NY 10010; (212) 481-4355], 1989. \$15.00.

Stephen Lester and others, *USING YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW* (Arlington, VA: Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes [P.O. Box 926, Arlington, VA 22216; phone (703) 276-7070], 1989. \$9.95.

John O'Connor and others, *THE CITIZENS TOXICS PROTECTION MANUAL* (Boston, MA: National Campaign Against Toxic Hazards [20 East Street, Suite 601, Boston, MA 02111; phone (617) 482-1477], 1987. \$25.00.

Peter Montague, *WHAT CHEMICALS EACH INDUSTRY USES* (Princeton, NJ: Environmental Research Foundation [P.O. Box 5036, Annapolis, MD 21403-7036; phone (410) 263-1584], 1989. \$25.00.

Ben Gordon and Peter Montague, *A CITIZENS TOXIC WASTE AUDIT MANUAL* (Chicago, IL: Greenpeace [1017 W. Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60607; phone (312) 666-3305], 1989. Free, but Greenpeace requests a \$5.00 donation to defray costs.

For additional information about the federal right to know law, contact the Working Group on Right to Know, c/o U.S. PIRG, 215 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, Washington, DC 20003; (202) 546-9707.

--Peter Montague

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CONGRESS ANNOUNCES INVESTIGATION OF MR. REILLY, MR. HAIR AND MR. BUNTROCK

U.S. Representatives John Dingell (D-Mich.) and Thomas Bliley (R-Va.) announced December 6 that they will investigate the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's inspector general, John Martin, principally for failing to pursue unscrupulous superfund contractors but also for other alleged failures. Dingell and Bliley head the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on oversight and investigations.

One of the allegations to be examined by Congressional investigators concerns Martin's handling of a controversy involving EPA Administrator William Reilly; EPA employees William Sanjour and Hugh Kaufman have presented evidence that Reilly improperly intervened in a federal-state dispute over hazardous waste regulation in North Carolina (See RHWN #151, #156, #157.) A whistleblower in Martin's own office, J. Richard Wagner, has alleged that Martin's official investigation of Reilly's action on North Carolina was, at best, badly botched and, at worst, represented a felonious conspiracy between Martin, Reilly, Jay Hair (President of the National Wildlife Federation), and Dean Buntrock, chief executive officer of Waste Management, Inc., to cover up improper attempts by Buntrock to influence Reilly at a breakfast meeting arranged by Hair.

According to the NEW YORK TIMES (12/10/89, pg. 37) and other sources, Dingell and Bliley are concerned about allegations that Martin--who is supposed to be an independent watchdog over EPA managers--met with Reilly before launching an inquiry into Reilly's and Buntrock's involvement in the North Carolina matter. Martin's inquiry cleared Reilly of any impropriety.

In a letter to Martin advising him of the Congressional probe, Dingell and Bliley requested a raft of documents concerning the inspector general's office of investigations from 1984 through 1989.

Martin was first appointed EPA's Inspector General by President Reagan in October, 1983; he was reappointed to that post by President Bush in October, 1989. From 1981 to 1983 Martin was Assistant Inspector General for Investigations at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: carol steinsapir; hazardous materials; statistics; ny; mobil; gasoline spills; local governments; rtk; cchw; john martin; william reilly; william sanjour; hugh kaufman; j richard wagner; nc; states sovereignty; jay hair; dean buntrock; wmi; epa;