

Right to Know

A U.S. Report Spurs Community Action By Revealing Polluters Northfield, Minn., and Others Are Shocked to Discover Who's Discharging What But Do the Numbers Mislead?

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NORTHFIELD, Minn. — Surrounded by clear skies, lush farmland and prime fishing lakes, this historic town is famed as a rural oasis. Its main street, where residents heroically foiled a bank robbery by Jesse James in 1876, attracts thousands of tourists. Its biggest industry is higher education and its tallest smokestack soars from the stately Gothic campus of Carleton College. Northfield's motto: "Cows, Colleges and Contentment."

But over the past 13 months, things have changed so much that an art supply store on the town's main street displayed a five-foot papier mache dead cow with its feet in the air and a sign: "Cows, Colleges and Carcinogens."

What happened? The uproar here was the result of a massive U.S. government data base called the Toxics Release Inventory. The dull-sounding report is raising Cain in communities throughout the U.S. for a simple reason: For the first time, the government is telling local communities who's causing pollution in their neighborhoods—and communities are shocked.

No Telltale Signs

Here, for instance, residents never suspected Sheidahl Inc., a maker of flexible electronic circuits for automobiles and computers. The clean, high-tech plant produces no telltale smoke or odors. "We always thought of Sheidahl as a good neighbor," says Joan Wolf, a poet and editor of a literary magazine. But then a newspaper reported that Sheidahl, the town's largest employer, was polluting the air with nearly 400 tons a year of methylene chloride, a widely used solvent classified as a "probable human carcinogen" although its emission into the air is unregulated. To defuse controversy, Sheidahl immediately volunteered to reduce the emissions 90% by 1993, but the issue has split the community.

In 1989, the federal government began disclosing the staggering quantity of toxic chemicals discharged annually from 20,000 plants across the nation. The Toxics Release Inventory lists plant-by-plant emis-

sions of 320 chemicals believed to cause serious health effects—a total of nearly 5 billion pounds of emissions, mostly legal or simply unregulated. The report tells local citizens what poisons the neighborhood factory is putting out, how much and whether they're polluting the air, water or land. The government also reports what chemicals are being stored and whether any spills have occurred.

Significant Incident

The information is disclosed under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, adopted in 1986 after the Bhopal disaster in India. "The law empowers citizens to act," says Charles Elkins, a top Environmental Protection Agency official. "You don't have to be a government expert to ask tough questions, such as why a plant pollutes twice as much as competitors in the same industry."

The first two annual reports on industry's toxic emissions have had significant impact. Dozens of Fortune 500 companies have announced voluntary reductions. Monsanto Corp., for example, has already reduced toxic air emissions 39% since 1987 and expects to meet its goal of 90% by 1992. Dow Chemical Co. plans to reduce overall emissions 50% by 1995. Du Pont Co. pledges to cut air emissions 80% by 1993 and cancer-causing components 90% by 2000. Chemical Manufacturers Association spokesman Owen Kean explains: "The public increasingly measures companies by their [emissions] numbers and what they are doing about them."

In California's Silicon Valley, 2,000 protesters marched against an International Business Machines Corp. plant revealed in 1989 as the state's worst emitter of ozone-destroying chlorinated fluorocarbons. Right-to-know was a "significant factor" in IBM's decision to eliminate CFCs at all plants by end of 1993, a spokesman says.

A Safer Neighborhood

Residents of Springfield, Mass., used the law to find out what dangers lurked in plants and warehouses adjacent to their homes. Companies had to "justify why they were using dangerous chemicals," says James Controvich, Springfield's emergency preparedness director. Monsanto, for example, agreed to move 1,000 drums of resins containing flammable solvents from a public warehouse to safer storage at its Springfield plant. Some companies eliminated extreme hazards, such as cyanide, and others corrected dangerous conditions. "The neighborhood is definitely safer," says the East Springfield Neighborhood Council's Kathleen Brown.

Right-to-know also generated public support for tougher laws. The report showed that air emissions, accounting for nearly 40% of all discharges, are "basically uncontrolled," says the EPA's Mr. Elkins. In October, Congress closed the loophole by mandating strict controls for 189 toxic chemicals under the revised Clean Air Act. In Louisiana, a state that resisted even minimal regulation, right-to-know prompted public outrage and legislative action: In 1988, it adopted its first

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