

California News

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Toxic-release record tattles on polluters Latest weapon in war on wastes

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SACRAMENTO — Residents of Richmond never suspected that Bio Rad Laboratories, a maker of chemicals used in medical and scientific research, was polluting their neighborhoods.

There was no visible smoke or foul odors coming from the company's nondescript, single-story building.

But then Citizens for a Better Environment began criticizing the company for fouling the air with 30 tons a year of chloroform, a solvent classified as a "probable human carcinogen." Local air-quality enforcers were astonished; the plant had no permit to release chloroform.

How did the environmental group know so much about Bio Rad's toxic-waste record?

It had access to the company's discharge data through the federal government's Toxics Release Inventory, a Who's Who of polluters that identifies neighborhood poisoners — and gives communities a way to pressure industries into cleaning up their act.

The inventory was created under the federal Emergency Planning Community Right-to-Know Act, adopted in 1986 after the deaths of thousands of people in a chemical disaster in Bhopal, India.

The law requires manufacturers who employ 10 or more people and who use large amounts of chemicals to report their discharges annually to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The California state Office of Environmental Protection receives a copy of the reports and is usually six months ahead of the federal government in compiling the results for the public.

The inventory "is fast becoming one of the most powerful tools we have to reduce toxic emissions," EPA Administrator William Reilly told an industry group this month.

Available to any citizen, the annual inventory lists plant-by-plant discharges of 330 chemicals believed to cause serious health problems — a total of nearly 6 billion pounds of toxics released into the nation's environment.

At first glance, the compendium appears as a massive, meaningless maze of numbers, codes and tongue-twisting chemicals. But growing numbers of grass-roots environmental groups have learned to use computers to analyze the data in ways calculated to spark community outrage and embarrass corporate leaders — often with positive results.

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"It's shock medicine for people who have no idea of the amount of toxics they are exposed to," said Ted Smith, director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition in San Jose.

Smith was one of the first activists in the nation to capitalize on the inventory when California officials began disclosing the data in 1988. His group published a list of the area's 12 worst polluters called the "Silicon Valley Dirty Dozen." The list showed that the semiconductor companies used the sky between San Francisco and San Jose to dispose of nearly 9 million pounds of toxic gases in one year.

In 1989, 2,000 protesters marched against an International Business Machines Corp. plant in San Jose that was revealed in the federal inventory as the nation's worst emitter of ozone-destroying chlorinated fluorocarbons.

Community pressure was one factor in the company's decision to eliminate the use of such chemicals in its plants worldwide by 1993, a spokesman said. IBM issued a news release this month reporting a 95 percent reduction in emissions at the San Jose facility during the past three years.

Environmentalists also singled out the Aerojet plant in Rancho

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Cordova as a top ozone offender, based on emission figures that the company reported to the EPA. Since receiving the unfavorable designation in 1987, Aerojet reports it has eliminated all but 2 percent of its chlorinated fluorocarbons emissions.

The availability of information on toxics has galvanized small citizen groups to take on big industry.

Mothers of East Los Angeles, for example, used the inventory to help defeat a commercial hazardous waste incinerator in their community. They broke down the emissions data by ZIP codes to show that their neighborhoods already had more than their fair share of exposure to hazardous waste. Last week, the developer announced that it was abandoning the project, charging that "political pressures" had unraveled the deal.

Other groups have matched the pollution data with wind patterns and county cancer and birth defect registries to argue that a local industry may be endangering their

employees and neighbors. The inventory also can be an effective enforcement check — simply compare the emissions that manufacturers report to the EPA inventory with the limits on their state discharge permits.

That is how Bio Rad came to the attention of Michael Belliveau and Julia May, leaders of Citizens for a Better Environment in San Francisco.

The company's name popped up on a list they had requested of area companies reporting discharges of chlorinated solvents. Such emissions are regulated by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, but when Belliveau and May asked for the company's permit, district officials found none.

"The air district never knew about them, and they were exposing an estimated 10,000 people to a cancer risk," Belliveau said.

Prosecutors immediately pounced on Bio Rad for violating emissions rules and failing to warn area residents of the toxic hazard.