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Bush administration remiss in toxic waste cleanup

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It has been nearly 30 years since the infamous toxic waste pit known as Love Canal jolted Congress into creating the Superfund program to clean up abandoned chemical dumps. Nonetheless, tens of thousands of New Yorkers are still living with hazards that should have been removed decades ago.

New York is home to more than seven dozen toxic waste sites that still linger on the Superfund's cleanup list. At many of these sites, nothing more than cosmetic changes have been made - rusting barrels have been removed from the surface, and vegetation has reemerged on what looked like moonscapes 20 years ago. But beneath the surface, a toxic stew is percolating and spreading, leaching chemicals into aquifers, bubbling up to the surface of the soil, and releasing methane and other volatile gases into the air.

People exposed to these chemicals - in particular, children whose bodies are still developing - are at heightened risk of everything from cancer to brain damage to reproductive problems.

Unfortunately, this public health threat is being neglected. The rate of Superfund cleanups has declined more than 50 percent since President Bush took office. In each of the last three years, only 40 Superfund sites, of 1,200 nationwide, have been declared "construction complete" - the point at which the physical mechanism for cleaning up a site is in place. In each of the last four years of the Clinton administration, by contrast, at least 85 sites were declared "construction complete."

Much of the problem can be traced to funding shortages. In 1995, the new Republican majority in Congress declined to renew the taxes paid by oil and chemical companies that had supported the program from its inception. At the time, the Superfund still had tax reserves of nearly \$4 billion, but by 2003, this money had completely run out, leaving average taxpayers to pick up the full cleanup tab for the industries responsible for creating the problem.

From 2000 to 2005, Superfund revenues not surprisingly fell an estimated \$1.75 billion short of what was needed to meet program needs, according to a study commissioned by Congress. Nonetheless, Congress, backed by the Bush administration, has continued to put tax breaks for the oil and chemical industries over protecting public health and safety. Funding for cleanups has steadily declined when adjusted for inflation, and President Bush's 2007 budget request is \$20 million less than the previous year's.

In a report released last month, our organizations, the Center for American Progress and the Center for Progressive Reform, profiled five of New York's most dangerous Superfund sites (along with sites in the nation's nine other largest states). These sites include Computer Circuits and Lawrence Aviation Industries Inc. in Suffolk County, Liberty Industrial Finishing and Old Roosevelt Field Contaminated Groundwater Area in Nassau County, and Consolidated Iron & Metal in Orange County.

Taken together, 22,790 New Yorkers live in the census tracts containing these sites, including 3,767 children nine and younger. Economically disadvantaged Americans and minorities disproportionately reside around Superfund sites, though it's clear communities of all types are at risk. In the census tract surrounding the Consolidated Iron & Metal site, the median household income for 1999 was about \$25,000, just 60 percent of the national median of \$41,994; and the tract was 74 percent racial minority.

The Bush administration, aided by the Republican-controlled Congress, has sought to keep its

inaction on sites like these from public scrutiny. In June, the U.S. Senate held its first oversight hearing in four years on Superfund cleanups. At the hearing, Democrats focused on a Bush administration document that apparently advises EPA regional offices, in preparing budget requests, to indicate the least amount of money they can get by on for high-hazard sites - an approach that will delay cleanups years if not decades.

However, the administration has refused to allow senators to publicly release the document. Such secrecy signals a record that cannot be defended.

There's a simple solution to the problem of lagging cleanups: reinstating the Superfund's polluter-pays tax on the oil and chemical industries. Taking this action would recommit the nation to cleaning up the most dangerous toxic waste dumps and protecting the health of our children. Unfortunately, it appears the Bush administration and Congress are more concerned with protecting the oil and chemical industries.

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