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July 03, 2006

Failure to clean up toxic dumps leaves residents at risk

By RENA STEINZOR and REECE RUSHING
FLORIDA VOICES

It's been more than a quarter century 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 Floridians are still living with hazards that should have been removed decades ago.

Florida is home to several dozen toxic waste sites that still linger on Superfund's cleanup list. At many such 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, 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 Bush's FY 2007 budget request is \$20 million less than the previous year's.

In a report released early this month, the Center for American Progress and the Center for Progressive Reform, profiled five of Florida's most dangerous Superfund sites (along with sites in the nation's nine other largest states). These sites include: American Creosote Works (Pensacola Pit) and Escambia Wood -- Pensacola in Escambia County, Normandy Park Apartments in Hillsborough County, Reeves Southeastern Galvanizing Corporation in Hillsborough County, and Stauffer Chemical Corp. in Pinellas County.

Taken together, 21,517 Floridians lived in the census tracts containing these sites, including 2,626 children nine and under. Economically disadvantaged Americans and minorities disproportionately

reside around Superfund sites, though it's clear communities of all types are at risk. In census tracts containing three of the five profiled sites (the two Escambia County sites and the Reeves Southeastern Galvanizing site in Hillsborough County), the median household income is well below the national median, and the population in the area around the American Creosote Works site is 50 percent minority.

The Bush administration, aided by the Republican-controlled Congress, has sought to keep its inaction on sites like these from public scrutiny. Earlier this month, 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. But the administration has refused to allow senators to release the document.

Such secrecy signals a record that cannot be defended. There's a simple solution to the problem of lagging cleanups: reinstating 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.

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