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Industry tax breaks have stalled Superfund cleanups

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 Pennsylvanians are still living with hazards that should have been removed decades ago.

Pennsylvania is home to just under 100 toxic waste sites that still linger on Superfund's clean-up 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 re-emerged 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

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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 FY 2007

budget request is \$20 million less than the previous year's.

In a report released last week, our organizations, the Center for American Progress and the Center for Progressive Reform, profiled five of Pennsylvania's most dangerous Superfund sites (along with sites in the nation's nine other largest states). The sites: East Tenth Street and Lower Darby Creek Area in Delaware County; Sharon Steel (Farrell Works Disposal Area) in Mercer County; UGI Columbia Gas Plant in Lancaster County; and Watson Johnson Landfill in Bucks County.

Taken together, 15,188 Pennsylvanians live in the census tracts containing these sites, including 2,047 children 9 years old and younger. Economically disadvantaged Americans disproportionately reside around Superfund sites, though it's clear communities of all types are at risk. In three of the census tracts surrounding these five Superfund sites, the median household income for 1999 was below the national average of \$41,994.

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. However, 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: reinstitute 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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