Citizens fighting toxics received a fabulous gift from Uncle Sam last week—an amazing database of information about toxic chemicals being dumped into the environment by 19,278 manufacturing companies. It's real, it's available, and it works. It's called the TRI (toxic release inventory) database, and it's an enormous arsenal of weapons and tools, just begging to be used against your favorite polluter.

Citizens now have a huge reservoir of facts at their command--facts reported by the companies themselves about the toxic chemicals they are dumping into the air, the water, and the soil, even including the names of the waste haulers they are sending their wastes to.

Suddenly Uncle Sam has hung the dirty laundry of 19,278 companies out where everyone can see it. The database contains information on a list of 309 individual chemicals, each of them selected for inclusion on the list because it is particularly nasty (carcinogenic, mutagenic or teratogenic). Therefore, when a company admits that they're dumping even ONE of these chemicals into the air or water in your community, you're got them on the defensive. Now it's up to them to explain (if they can) why dumping cancer-causing chemicals into human communities makes sense, why you and your neighbors should continue to put up with it.

"Anyone who has to dump cancer-causing chemicals into our town just to make a living is mismanaging their resources," you can say. "We simply want you to stop." Then you can mount a campaign to force them to reduce their wastes. The goal is simple: zero discharge before the end of this century. America, toxics-free by 2000!

For two centuries, industry has been in control because citizens couldn't get the goods on them. You knew by looking at those smoke stacks and discharge pipes that something was very wrong, but you didn't know what. Now that dark veil of secrecy begins to lift. Light begins to shine.

A new kind of community organizing is suddenly now possible. Groups with common interests can find each other and begin to work together--citizens fighting Waste Generator A in central Ohio can now link up with citizens fighting Waste Processor B in central Illinois because both towns are being polluted by Waste Generator A. Citizens fighting a toxic waste dump or a hazardous waste incinerator can get a list of major customers sending wastes to their town, and can organize a campaign to discourage customers from shipping toxics into their community. It could ruin the local Waste Processor's business, or, at the very least, put heat on that Waste Processor from every corner of the nation, roasting them slowly on a spit of publicity and shame.

What you can do

In your own town, you get the facts about toxic emissions from the big plant across the river. Then you write up a short report (which we call a Waste Audit Report), you print up a few hundred copies, hold a press conference, and now your favorite polluter REALLY on the defensive. He (or she) will have to explain why it's "smart management" to dump hundreds or thousands of pounds of supremely nasty chemicals into a human community--why dumping carcinogens into the air and water is good for business, good for children, good for kittens and bunny rabbits. This is hard to explain without looking silly or guilty or worse.

Now you're in a position to knock on the Plant Manager's door and ask for a negotiating session. What you want is entirely reasonable: you want a waste reduction plan with specific target dates and measurable milestones along the way. You want regular progress reports from the polluter, you want a firm commitment that the goal is zero discharge by a particular date. You want no BS.

You've told the press that they can expect to hear from you next year because you're going to be producing a Waste Audit Report on your favorite polluter every spring, when the new federal data becomes available.

Meanwhile, you've started rummaging around in the federal database for other companies in the same business as your favorite polluter. You find several, and you notice they are reporting different chemicals and different amounts of similar chemicals. You call the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW) in Arlington, VA [703/276-7070], they put you in touch with citizens active in the home communities of those other polluters, you call them up and enlist their help. You learn what pressure tactics they're finding effective. You learn that management in another plant across the state has initiated a new process to make Widget X with far fewer toxic wastes. Now, armed with your new knowledge, you ask for another meeting with your favorite polluter and you ask why he or she can't adopt this new technology and spare your community the burden of toxic dumping. Suddenly, you find that the role of local government (which so often stands between the polluters and the victims of pollution, protecting the polluters from our wrath) has diminished, that you've started attacking the polluters DIRECTLY without local government being able to run interference. You're demanding the right to inspect plants yourself, you're working directly with representatives of labor, helping them get their health and safety demands met in return for inside information, and you're forcing management to make commitments to waste reduction, with specific goals tied to specific dates. You have advanced beyond the right to KNOW; you have asserted the right to ACT!

This is not fantasy. This is real. People are doing this today. To learn how to get access to the TRI database (or how to get paper copies of the right-to-know data through the mail) and how to do a Waste Audit Report on your favorite polluter, get the CITIZEN'S TOXIC WASTE AUDIT MANUAL (76 pgs.), produced by Ben Gordon of Greenpeace in collaboration with us. It's available free from Greenpeace U.S.A. Toxics Campaign, 1017 W. Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60607 (but they would really appreciate a $5.00 donation). Without even blushing, we are prepared to say that this is a crackerjack manual describing how to use federal "right to know" information, step by step. To learn more about getting through the front gate to inspect your local polluter's facility, get Richard Youngstrom's CITIZENS TOXICS PREVENTION MANUAL ON THE NEIGHBORHOOD INSPECTION (39 pgs.), available for $5.50 from the National Toxics Campaign, 29 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111; phone (617) 482-1477. After you locate those other polluters across the state or across the nation who are in the same business as your local polluter, and you want to establish a network of citizen groups so you can all work together toward your common goal, you will of course want to contact network headquarters in Arlington, VA: Lois Gibbs, Will Collette and Brian Lipsett at CCHW, F.O. Box 926, Arlington, VA 22216; phone (703) 276-7070; they publish a raft of their own useful publications and they're in touch with practically every group fighting every polluter in the country. Lastly, get yourself hooked into the computerized bulletin board for pollution fighters, Environet, run by Greenpeace: (415) 861-6503, and then send electronic mail to Ben Gordon, asking him to give you free 800 phone service into Environet. The times they are a-changin.

--Peter Montague

Descriptor terms: tri; computers; citizen activism; rtk; right to act;