

Obama blocks EPA's crucial TCE report

By [Gabriel Dunsmith](#) - Guest Columnist - Published: Wednesday, September 28, 2011

At the Camp Lejeune military base near Wilmington, N.C., 750,000 people were exposed to the industrial chemical trichloroethylene (TCE), which is known to cause liver and kidney damage and is a suspected carcinogen. In Woburn, Mass., multiple chemical companies polluted the town's water supply with TCE, providing the backstory for the book and film *A Civil Action*. And in Asheville, N.C., electroplating company CTS Corporation dumped TCE onto the ground, contaminating streams and groundwater; a nearby family's well tested with 4,200 times the legal limit of TCE, and 49 cases of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma cropped up within a mile of the site.

President Obama recently made a disastrous decision in regards to TCE that will have detrimental consequences on human health and the environment.

On Friday, Sept. 2, the White House blocked a report from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that would have classified TCE as a carcinogen. News of the decision was muffled because, that very same day, the Administration killed the EPA's tighter ozone standards, shocking the environmental community. Not only would the EPA's report have classified TCE as a cancer-causing chemical, but it would have also chronicled the chemical's adverse effects on the nervous, reproductive and immune systems.

The current guidelines for TCE are over 20 years old, having been last revised in 1989. TCE is classified as a carcinogen in the European Union, and has been completely banned in Sweden.

During the Bush Administration, senior officials interfered with the EPA's Integrated Risk Management System (IRIS), the program responsible for issuing reports on toxic chemicals. Lenny Siegel, director of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight (CPEO), claims that EPA scientists were told they would lose their jobs if they pushed for stricter standards on TCE.

For some time, Obama's EPA sought to rekindle IRIS. But concerns about backlash from the chemical industry may have caused the Administration to reconsider. Environmental groups have pointed a finger at Bill Daley, the White House chief of staff, who was hired in an effort to restore the Administration's relationship with the business community after Republicans trampled the Democrats in last year's midterms.

TCE is one of the most common pollutants at Superfund sites across the nation. Many of these contaminated facilities were run by the Fed itself—such as the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, which is now seeing a \$1 billion cleanup. Because the new TCE report would pave the way for stricter health standards and reinvigorated clean-up efforts, the chemical industry has lobbied for decades to keep new rules off the table. The Pentagon, with its extensive pollution history, hasn't been too keen on new EPA regulations either.

After Obama quashed the TCE report, environmental groups were irate. "Given its recent record of catering to the chemical industry," said Daniel Rosenberg of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), "we are concerned that the White House is resorting to the Bush Administration's approach of interference to delay the release of health assessments."

Lenny Siegel with the CPEO (who also won EPA's 2011 Citizen's Excellence in Community Involvement Award) demanded in a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson that the EPA "release the TCE Toxicological Review immediately."

The TCE report was seen as pivotal in the Obama Administration's relationship with corporate polluters.

IRIS is in charge of issuing reports on many other chemicals, too. TCE is only a small part of a gargantuan picture: IRIS could be delaying all of its reports on toxic chemicals, and thereby hampering the protection that millions of Americans need from chemical exposure.

Human lives swing in the balance.

Now that the TCE report has been vetoed, it isn't a great sign for other environmental initiatives in the United States. If the president nullified something as seemingly simple as a cancer report, then greed and money are playing into the mix. Behind closed doors, corporate polluters are winning the battle to erode environmental protections and decimate public health.

Here's the ugly truth: electroplating companies (like the aforementioned CTS Corporation) use TCE every day. Chemical companies profit from it. And when politics is concerned, placation sometimes overtakes morality.

It is high time for President Obama to stop caving to the demands of the chemical industry. TCE kills. If the president cares more about corporate profits than the health and safety of the American people, then he shows a lack of compassion for human life. If Obama is under the impression he is helping the economy by stuffing more money into the wallets of chemical companies, then he is sorely misguided. And even if it were helping the economy, then sure, the economy's important, but not at the expense of human health and the environment.

Hundreds of communities need protection from TCE. People shouldn't encounter it in the environment; it shouldn't be in the air they breathe or the water they drink. Children shouldn't be forced to grow up in a world where they are exposed to life-threatening chemicals.

The president has a moral obligation to act for the American people. He must brand TCE as a carcinogen, fund full-scale clean ups at TCE-stricken sites across the nation, provide healthcare to all who have been exposed to the toxin, punish the polluters and ban TCE from our environment and industrial processes.

While Obama can't undo the wounds that TCE has already caused, he can prevent maladies from occurring in the future. The last thing he should do is prolong the pain and suffering that too many Americans have endured due to trichloroethylene exposure. Every day of inaction—every day of blockages or delays on EPA reports—is another day that TCE can wreck havoc on human bodies.

If nothing is done to stop trichloroethylene, it will continue to contaminate our land, seep into our water and make our people sick. Obama must reverse his obstruction of the TCE rule, and do it now.

—Gabriel Dunsmith '15 is a member of the Vassar Greens.

http://www.miscellanynews.com/2.1577/obama-blocks-epa-s-crucial-tce-report-1.2640572#.Twd0b_LfWul