



The Picket

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Protecting Students' Rights Since 1896

Social Security increase largest in 15 years

STACEY DOYLE
Picket Staff Writer

Next year, senior citizens can expect a 4.1 percent cost-of-living increase in their Social Security checks, the largest increase in the last 15 years. To counter this, the government is raising Social Security taxes for workers.

The annual increase began in 1975 as

a way to counter the rising inflation in America. This year's increase will mean about \$40 extra a month for 50 million senior citizens, 22 percent of which have no income outside of Social Security. This increase is significantly larger than last year's, which was only 2.7 percent.

This announcement follows a decision to raise the Medicare premium by \$10.30 a month beginning in January. By law,

this increase cannot exceed the individual's cost-of-living increase. Those senior citizens who will receive an increase that is less than \$10.30 a month will not be expected to pay all of the Medicare premium increase.

The Social Security Administration also announced that the cap on wages subject to the 12.4 percent payroll tax for Social Security will increase from \$90,000 to \$94,200. Nearly 160 million workers pay

Social Security and this increase will affect about 11.3 million of them. The average cost-of-living raise for workers is expected to be 3.6 percent, the same as last year's.

In addition, the age at which a person can retire and collect full Social Security benefits will increase by two months. Next year, those born in 1941 can retire at 65 years and eight months. The age of retirement is expected to hit 67 by 2027.



staff photo by Melissa Rogers

Shedding some light on West Campus

CASEY FORBES
Picket Staff Writer

The lights across from Shaw Hall should be completed the end of this month, officials said Friday. After inspections, the lights will be set to timers that turn on each evening.

The wiring is in place, but rain delayed finishing work, which should have begun last week. Once operational, the lights will operate from dusk until dawn, adapting to the time changes of each season.

The purpose for the lights is twofold, said Amy J. Martz, a staff member in the Facilities Management director's office. They will provide for a safer environment for pedestrians walking from the future housing complex and parking lot behind West Woods, and they will aesthetically enhance the campus.

The lights should be operational soon, but many students have seen a need for the lights in the past.

Lauren Patton, a Shepherd sophomore, feels that the West Campus lights would make her feel better protected, and she wants completion to come sooner rather than later.

"I walk from Burkhart back to Shaw sometimes at night," Patton said, "and if they're going to put lights in for safety reasons, they should get it done and quit procrastinating."

The project began in mid-summer 2005, before the start of the fall semester, as part of Shepherd's master plan for campus growth. The campus plan will extend West Campus well beyond West Woods, and many students will walk paths from the extended campus, past the future Center for Contemporary Arts, and on towards East Campus. Officials expect the lights to improve the walking environment on Shepherd's West Campus.

Social work program receives grant for last time?

CASEY FORBES
Picket Staff Writer

Shepherd's social work program received its 13th annual Title IV-E grant this year, but Congress may cut much of the program from the 2006 budget in an effort to reduce domestic spending.

This year's \$146,105 grant, awarded by the WV Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), works to achieve three primary goals. Firstly, the grant pays for tuition plus \$300 per month for selected Shepherd social work students. Secondly, DHHR staff within a 15 county region receives training. Lastly, Shepherd professor Amy Hampton and others teach classes required by child services for future foster parents.

Hampton expressed concern with the federal action with Title IV-E funds because, after West Virginia failed a federal audit, the need for improvement has been highly encouraged by the government.

"If [Title IV-E funds] are taken away," said Hampton, "we'd go back to the old system where kids would just be dropped off with people, and parents would play no role."

Hampton first experienced the program's benefits, she said, when Shepherd "students" in the Title IV-E program helped teach her the ways of the work.

"I was a psych major," said Hampton, "and when I started in social work, after a few days of policy study, they handed me a case folder and sent me out. My skills got better because [Title IV-E grant receivers] were there."

Laura Winkler, a freshman social work major, would like to see the grant remain for a number of reasons, but also feels that money should not start or stop the effort.

"I really enjoy helping people," said Winkler. "[Social work] is something I'd love to get up each morning and do. But considering [social workers] don't make much, [the grant] would help with paying back loans."

This year there are five Shepherd student recipients: Lisa Peltier, Tabitha Funk, Lynn Luckerth, Cassie Helmick and Dana O'Brien.

Each student receives the grant aide while completing 300 hours of social work and finishing their undergraduate classes. Once they graduate, the students are hired as DHHR "protective services foster care social workers" as part of the contract, according to the Oct. 7 press release.

For 13 years, Shepherd's Social Work Program has received the grant as part of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. More than 40 Shepherd students have graduated with aid from the Title IV-E grant and more than 120 people in the last year have been trained

to provide aide for West Virginia's 3,000 foster care children.

According to the Child Welfare League of America, a non-profit organization that handles over 3.5 million cases annually, "A cap or block [of] Title IV-E funding would reduce the federal government's commitment to share the costs of the caring for these abused and neglected children."

"Things are supposed to get better," said Dr. Douglas C. Horner, Shepherd's Social Work Program department chair.

"How is it that the richest country in the world has kids and elderly that are so vulnerable," Horner asked. "And health insurance has gone down for poor children. When people see [White House criticism] they blow off the idea, but this administration is tearing apart the country's safety net."

The U.S. Department of Labor expects the need for employment in social work to increase by 21-35 percent by 2012. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook for 2004-5 sights "the rapidly growing elderly population" and "the aging baby-boomer generation" as main reasons for the increase.

Since 1993 the program has spent over \$1.1 million of grant money in training students, DHHR workers, and future foster parents.

New SGA officers

Jessie Sigley

is a freshman with a major in political science and a minor in women's studies. Her goals for the SGA this year is to get a feel for how the SGA works and to help make policies that will benefit the student body.

Samantha Zurbuch

is a freshman with a major in political science and a minor in mass communication. Her goals for the SGA this year are to get the freshman class involved with the campus, especially through community service.

Taylor Downs

is a sophomore with a major in political science and a minor in history. This year he is aiming for stronger group unity and better cooperation within the SGA.

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The Picket

The official student newspaper of Shepherd University

www.shepherd.edu/pickweb

NEWS
304.876.5377

BUSINESS
304.876.5687

FAX
304.876.5100

EMAIL
pickweb@shepherd.edu

staff

Christian E. Brown
Editor In Chief

Adam Leviton
Managing Editor

Charissa Hardy
News Editor

Stacey Doyle
Assistant News Editor

Roy Rogers
Op-Ed Editor

John Cooper
Assistant Op-Ed Editor

Kate Alexander
Lifestyle Editor

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send submissions

Administration Box #42
Shepherd University,
Shepherdstown, WV 25443,

or via email to
pickweb@shepherd.edu.

Miers confirmation sees the GOP split

PRENTICE D. SMALL
Picket Staff Writer

Almost immediately after President Bush announced his pick for the Supreme Court a barrage of mixed reactions came from both sides of the political spectrum.

Miers, who is nominated to replace Justice O'Connor, was George W. Bush's personal lawyer when he was governor of Texas. The 60 year-old also served as Deputy Chief of Staff to the President.

Upon her nomination, Bush stated that his appointee was "exceptionally suited" for the Supreme Court and asked the Senate to review her record thoroughly for a "prompt vote."

The hearing for Miers is scheduled for Nov. 7. About her appointment, Miers stated, "If confirmed, I recognize that I will have a tremendous responsibility to keep our judicial system strong and to help ensure that the courts meet their obligations to strictly apply the laws and the Constitution."

However many in the president's party are not sure. Manuel Miranda of the Third Branch Conference said that, "The reaction of many conservatives today will be that the president has made possibly the most unqualified choice since Abe Fortas, who had been the president's lawyer."



photo courtesy of <http://www.smu.edu>

Harriet Miers' hearing is scheduled of Nov. 7.

Sen. Blanche Lincoln, a Democrat from Arkansas, praised the Commander-in-Chief's decision to put a woman up for the court. In a press release, Sen. Lincoln said that she recognized Bush's "appreciation for diversity" in the nation's highest court.

The Senate majority leader, Bill Frist,

called the president's decision a "thoughtful and careful" selection and said that Miers was "a real trailblazer" as a role model for women in the legal profession. He added that her resume showed a career of "perseverance and hard work."

Harriet Miers ran into the most trouble when questions concerning her lack of judicial experience came up. Several senators expressed concern that she may not be able to handle the burden of the Court because of this. Sen. Rick Santorum, a Republican representing Pennsylvania, said that he has grave "concern" over Bush's pick.

Miers does have many supporters, such as John Hill Jr., the former justice of the Texas Supreme Court. In Hill's words Miers is "a fabulous woman who will make a good judge." Pat Robertson, the founder of CBN, had an optimistic view of the outcome and was quoted saying, "They're going to turn against a Christian who is a conservative picked by a conservative president and they're going to vote against her for confirmation? Not on your sweet life, if they [senators] want to stay in office,"

Joe Solmonese, the president of The Human Rights Campaign, a foundation that supports GLBT rights, said that the HRC expresses hope that "she is more fair minded" than her supporters think.

Pre-pharmacy and Pre-dentistry programs added

KAITLIN CURRY
Picket Staff Writer

The Shepherd University school of natural science and mathematics has recently teamed up with West Virginia University to offer two programs, PharmSTEP and DentSTEP, to undergraduate students. "This is a medically underserved area," says Dr. Burt Lidgerding, the dean of the school of natural sciences and mathematics. These two programs allow Shepherd students to study at either the WVU school of pharmacy or the WVU school of dentistry and then return to the Eastern Panhandle to their rotations, making an attempt to medically provide for the members of this rapidly growing community.

Like the already established MedSTEP program, both PharmSTEP and DentSTEP are highly selective and structured tracks. Students must apply and sign to these programs before the enter Shepherd as a freshman, and no students already enrolled at Shepherd may apply. In order to apply for PharmSTEP, high school students must have a 3.6 GPA, a specific mathematics SAT score of 600 and an ACT math score of 26. Letters of recommendation from teachers, guidance counselors, and community members are necessary and the student must write a "personal statement describing your interest in becoming a pharmacist and in entering the PharmSTEP program." Interviews with both the faculty at Shepherd and WVU may follow.

For the first two years of the PharmSTEP program the students will take courses at Shepherd, focusing on mathematics and science. The student will then transfer to the West Virginia University school of pharmacy, where he or she will study for three years, then returning to this area and performing his or her rotation at the eastern division of the WVU Health Sciences Center. In order to progress to WVU, the student must maintain a 3.6 at Shepherd and score adequately on the pharmacy admissions test. The student will have a doctorate of pharmacy from West Virginia University when he or she has finished the program.

As with PharmSTEP, the DentSTEP

applicants must submit at least three letters of recommendation and a personal statement, but the GPA and standardized test scores are more lenient. High school students must have an overall GPA of 3.25 and a total SAT score of 1000 or an ACT score of 22. The DentSTEP program is "open to students who are committed to becoming dentists in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia." After completing this program, students will receive both an undergraduate degree from Shepherd University and a doctorate of dentistry from West Virginia University.

According to Dr. Lidgerding, enrolling in these two programs is advantageous over other pre-pharmacy and pre-dentistry programs because "you are guaranteed admission to [West Virginia University] if you meet those standards." Students will have opportunities in lab before they receive their undergraduate degree that many other students do not receive in larger universities. Because Shepherd is a small institution, "we can look after the needs of the student better than a big school." While in this program, the students must interact outside of the classroom with health care professionals on a regular basis. As they progress through the program they will have more complex and hands-on experiences either in pharmacy or dentistry. The eastern division of the WVU Health Service Center serves as one location for these interactions with medical professionals.

A maximum of three students from each incoming freshman class can enroll within both the PharmSTEP and DentSTEP programs, which means that these programs will not be as big as the MedSTEP program.

Lidgerding hopes that Shepherd University will implement two more programs in conjunction with West Virginia University, including pre-physical therapy and medical technology. After about a year of working out the details with medical professionals from the Eastern Panhandle and the respective schools at WVU, Shepherd should have two more opportunities for students to receive an advanced degree and to practice the various forms of medicine within the Eastern Panhandle.





staff photo by Amanda Shank

Young skateboarding enthusiasts have been driven out of town and onto campus.

Skating the edge in Shepherdstown

LINDSEY FLETCHER
Picket Staff Writer

Shepherdstown skateboarding ordinances are forcing youths to seek new places to skate, while imposing tremendous damage to the university campus.

On Monday Oct. 10 between 2 and 2:30 pm, two young skateboarders were skating by the parking gates located by Ikenberry Hall, when one of them grabbed the gate for leverage and snapped the gate off. Instead of coming forward to admit to causing the damage, the young man fled the scene behind the library toward White Hall and was later apprehended by Sergeant Kelvington of the Shepherd University Police Department. Kelvington was patrolling the area and saw a young man that fit the description of the young man that had caused the damage given by communications professor Cecilia Mason whose office is located in Sara Cree facing Ikeneberry Hall.

"I saw him over there skating and then I saw him snap the gate off. I notified the officer on duty and she went to see if she could catch him and I went and picked up the gate" said Mason. Officer Kelvington said that he saw the young man who followed him back to the campus police station and confiscated his skateboard until his mother could be made aware of the situation. Kelvington stated, "less than 45 minutes later the young man came back with his mother and both were very apologetic and more than willing to pay for the damage." The young Martinsburg man, whose name must remain anonymous because he is a juvenile, was given his board back and then expected to pay for the damage. Assistant Director of Facilities, David Grove said that with parts and labor the damage amounted to "less than \$100."

The other side of this issue is where liability comes into play when these skateboarders are concerned. University Counselor Alan Perdue says that the "premises liability law in West Virginia continues to be fairly liberal for those who have suffered an injury, therefore we always need to be worried about the condition of the premises." Skateboarding is prohibited on campus; therefore there is not place on campus designed for skateboarders. He added that property damage is not a trivial issue to Shepherd because so much damage has been done to the sidewalks, portions of concrete such as the landings on the stairs by the Butcher

Center and around the flower beds and to the benches. Not only do the skateboards and the skateboarders damage the property, but they impose a certain amount of risk for themselves, the University residents and the campus as a whole. Perdue also says, "we just happen to be attractive to them because of the sidewalks and open spaces, but that forces us to be affirmative."

The pressing questions which expose the other side of this issue is where do the youths go to skate and whose responsibility is it to entertain these young skateboarders? When skateboarding was banned in Shepherdstown a skate society was formed to try to come to a compromise with the skaters and the officials, shop owners and residents of Shepherdstown. "Our main goal is to have a place for these kids to skate," says communications development specialist Diane Batt from the West Virginia Prevention Resource Center. Batt is an advocate for the youth in Shepherdstown, Martinsburg and Charles Town and says that "getting these kids other opportunities helps prevent them from getting involved in things like drugs an alcohol." Last spring the skate society held a ramp raising party where the kids could come and skate and hang out and they plan to host another skate party on Nov. 19 at the train station in Shepherdstown.

At one point the youth of the area were given permission by the train station and the dentist office that is located by the train station, to skate up there on certain days at certain times, but that has been put to a stop and these children then seek new skating grounds, and they have been using Shepherd University's campus. The Shepherdstown ordinance states that it is inappropriate for children to skate in front of businesses and in town and if they are caught their boards will be confiscated and they will have to complete four hours of community service before the boards can be returned. When the local kids were asked about how they felt about the situation they skated away declining to respond.

Although skating is prohibited in Shepherdstown, there is a church in Martinsburg that has built ramps and will allow kids to come and skate as long as they sign a waiver and wear a helmet. For more information contact Tim of 180 Skate in Martinsburg.

Amnesty International campaigns corporations

KAITLIN CURRY
Picket Staff Writer

Amnesty International's Upper Potomac Chapter held their monthly letter writing meeting on Oct. 16. The issue at hand was the exploitation of Ecuadorian indigenous communities by the Chevron-Texaco Corporation, leaving these people in a setting plagued by health and environmental devastation. Shepherdstown community member Lynn Yellot and the chapter's student coordinator, Cate Johnson, led the meeting.

Texaco entered Ecuador in 1964 and found immense amounts of valuable oil there, setting the overall standards of procedure for all oil operations in this region. However, the 1993 report "Amazon Crude" reports that "from 1972 until it left Ecuador in 1992, Texaco intentionally dumped more than 19 billion gallons of toxic wastewaters into the region and was responsible for 16.8 million gallons of crude oil spilling from the main pipeline into the forest." Soil and groundwater were contaminated, leaving the indigenous people in a dangerous environment. "Our health has been damaged seriously by the contamination caused by Texaco," reported Secoya tribe member Elias Piaguaie. "Many people in our community now have red stains on their skin and others have been vomiting and fainting. Some little children have died because their parents did not know they should not drink the river water."

High cancer rates are prevalent within those living close to the oil fields, and within the population living near contaminated water systems spontaneous miscarriage rates are elevated. According to these health reports, "the levels of oil chemicals like hydrocarbon concentrations were as high as 280 times the permitted levels in the European community."

Chevron has refused to give direct compensation to these affected communities, denying the link between their oil procedures in Ecuador and the public health hazards and environmental destruction. Although the company has a "controversial clean-up agreement" with the Ecuadorian government, Yellot says that "the government is not always representative of its people."

Along with writing letters to the Board of Directors at the Chevron-Texaco Corporation, those present at last Sunday's Amnesty International meeting also wrote letters of immediate concern to members of the Ecuadorian government, urging them to protect one woman, Lina Maria Espinoza Villegas, who has been receiving anonymous death threats since late summer. She is a human rights worker, training the locals about what their rights are and what they can do in order to protect those rights against the multinational oil companies in the region. Villegas participated in recent protests, urging communities to protect themselves and to document claims of human rights violations by the police. Amnesty International believes that there is a link between her death threats and her work with the community in Ecuador.

The letters also reminded these government officials of their membership in the Organization of American States, which adopted a "resolution reiterating its support for the work of human rights defenders."

Chevron is not the only multinational corporation that Amnesty is campaigning. According to Amnesty's website, a 1984 gas leak in Bhopal, India by the Union Carbide Corporation, now owned by Dow Chemical, killed 7,000 people in just three days and 15,000 in the following years. Thousands more still suffer the chronic health problems stemming from this disaster. The company "has refused to appear before the Bhopal District Court where criminal charges are still pending against them."

The Amnesty International's Corporate Action Network (CAN) has just launched a new campaign, called SHARE POWER, focused on making companies liable for their actions against human rights. SHARE POWER "helps you find this connection [to multinational corporations] and use it to help end corporate abuses of power." For more information, visit their website, www.amnestyusa.org/business/sharepower/.

The Amnesty International Upper Potomac Chapter has letter writing meetings monthly, with the next one scheduled for the middle of November in conjunction with a speaker from the Haiti's Light for Tomorrow organization.

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Shepherd sweeps Collegiate Forensics Association regional tournament

CHRIS BROWN
Picket Staff Writer

Shepherd's debate and forensics team captured a total of 24 trophies including the sweepstakes prize at the Collegiate Forensics Association regional fall tournament this past weekend. Shepherd's team racked up a total of 156 points in the competition, beating regional rivals such as Westchester, Bloomsburg, and Cumberland. The closest competitor, Westchester, only took home 108 points at the tournament. Shepherd's team did well across the board, competing in almost every event and taking home trophies in most categories.

This was the first time that such an event has been held on Shepherd's campus, and this

of these victories, another was added to the list: Shepherd won the sweepstakes prize, awarded for the total points scored by all competitors on the team. Shepherd was nearly 50 points ahead of its closest competitor, Westchester.

Dr. Robert Willgoos spoke for the university at the event, extolling the virtues of debate and forensics competitions. "When has the football team ever gone against Michigan, Ohio State, or West Point, and won?" Willgoos asked rhetorically. He feels that debate competitions are the one place where very small schools can compete on even terms with large prestigious universities. Dr. Kevin Williams of the Communications Department said that he enjoyed debate and forensics because it is a chance to enfuse



staff photo by Melissa Rogers

Shepherd debate team (Above) swept the CFA regional tournament.

put added stress on the team. "We've got a lot to defend," said Ben Adducchio, a member of the debate team in an interview before the event. However, this added stress apparently boosted their drive to win.

Ashley Young and Nick Keresztury took home the 6th place award in the Dramatic Duo event for Shepherd, and Kate Alexander and Adducchio came in 3rd in that event. Mandy Kaler took home 2nd in Informative speaking. Kate Alexander and Keresztury seized 5th and 3rd place respectively in Single Dramatic Interpretation. Shepherd's team swept the field in the Communication Analysis division, taking 5th (Ashley Young), 3rd (Brittany Young), 2nd (Kaler), and 1st place (Alexander). However, Shepherd was shut out of the Lincoln-Douglas debate, which was dominated by Fairmont State. Shepherd fared better in the Parliamentary debate, in which the team of Keresztury and Adducchio took 4th. In Persuasive Speaking Adducchio took first for Shepherd. Brittany Young took 2nd place in After Dinner Speaking. In Program Oral Interpretation Alexander took 6th, and Keresztury took 3rd. Shepherd also swept the Pentathlon trophies, which recognize competitors who excel in multiple events. Brittany Young took 5th, Adducchio took 3rd, Alexander took 2nd, and Keresztury finished at the top of this award. After all

a competition with the rigors of academics.

Many of the visitors to the event felt that it was well organized and enjoyable. Janelle Piercy of Fairmont State said that she liked the layout of the campus, but felt that holding the event during school on a Friday made it difficult for the debaters to get around. "With this many people I always wonder who's going to forget where to go," Piercy said. Sarah Nettleton said that the event was well laid out, but parking was a problem at Shepherd. Scott Gilmore said that the students of Shepherd were very helpful during his stay, directing him to various buildings when he became lost and being accommodating in general. Carl Hyden, the president of CFA and director of forensics at Morgan State, said that Shepherd has a great campus and that Dr. Joyce Webb, an event organizer and faculty advisor to Shepherd's team, did a "phenomenal job" organizing the event.

Dr. Webb felt that even though the team won 1st place sweepstakes in every event it competed in last year, the victory was still a surprise. "This is a rebuilding year for the team... to win the first big tournament of the year is a pleasant surprise, but not unexpected," Webb said. Webb was also pleased that every team that competed left with something. "It was a great competition."



staff photo by Chris Moore

The current observatory, which resides on top of the Scarborough Library, will be ousted by the building of a newer, computerized one.

Observatory has Shepherd seeing stars

BETHANY DAVIDSON
Picket Staff Writer

The construction of an astronomical observatory is expected to be completed this semester on the roof of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies according to Dr. Jason Best, observatory director.

The project began in October 2004, when Best, who is also an associate professor of astrophysics at Shepherd University, obtained an Innovation Grant. The grant, the first of its kind in Shepherd's history, is part of a Research Challenge Fund Science and Technology Award from the West Virginia Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research.

"The new observatory will allow us to expand our teaching, research and outreach efforts in astronomy," said Best. The facility will aid in the teaching of courses such as astronomy, physics and physical science. It will also be a resource for both faculty and students conducting research in planetary, stellar and galactic astrophysics to be presented at scientific conferences.

Research-grade equipment will be housed in the dome above the Byrd Center. The grant

provided for a 14 inch diameter computerized telescope. A CCD camera is available for data acquisition and a spectograph can be used for stellar and galactic analysis.

The observatory will be a place for the community to learn as well. Monthly astronomy open house nights will be held throughout the school year along with other special public astronomy events. "Astronomical observations represent the essence of humanity's ongoing quest for knowledge, our desire for discovery. We are pleased to have such a scientific facility at Shepherd and invite the campus community and the public to share in the wonders of the universe with us," said Best.

"The opening of the observatory is a significant development in Shepherd's growth as a regional university," said Dr. Burt Lidgerding, dean of the school of natural sciences and mathematics. "It will allow Shepherd to provide educational opportunities in astronomy to area schools and that is the type of opportunity a regional university should provide to the community."

Further information about the observatory can be found at www.shepherd.edu/astronomy.

INTOXIKON!

ALCOHOL RESEARCH SUBJECTS WANTED!

Intoxikon, an alcohol/drug education and training company, is recruiting subjects for an interesting controlled drinking study in the Charles Town area. Men and women who are in good health, like to party, and want to earn up to \$150 to drink alcohol are invited to apply. The study will take place on October 25, 2005.

Call (215) 504-8004 (collect) and ask to speak with the Alcohol Project Director.

YOU MUST BE 21-30 YEARS OLD (State Photo ID Required) to participate.

EPA tells polluters it wants less data

MICHAEL HAWTHORNE
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

CHICAGO — Americans soon could be getting less information about toxic chemicals released into the environment.

Under a proposal from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, industrial companies would be freed from reporting most chemical releases of less than 5,000 pounds, up from 500 pounds under current law. Factories, power plants, refineries and other sources of pollution also would need to report their releases only once every other year instead of annually.

A top agency official said the proposed changes would reduce the regulatory burden on industries while giving the EPA more time to review the data for trends, such as whether releases of a specific chemical are on the rise or if a certain industry or factory is having problems.

"We spend so much time receiving forms and entering the data that we don't have enough time to analyze it," Kimberly Nelson, the EPA's assistant administrator for environmental information, said in an interview.

Critics of the plan say it would weaken a 1986 law that by all accounts has nudged companies to curb pollution by giving the public more information about chemical releases. Congress created the Toxics Release Inventory in response to a chemical catastrophe at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, that killed more than 2,000 people.

The critics note that people and groups already perform their own analyses of the EPA's data. Cutting the amount of information provided and releasing it less frequently would make it more difficult to track some companies and determine pollution trends, they said.

"Now it's companies first and communities last," said Sean Moulton, a policy analyst with OMB Watch, a Washington-based advocacy group. "I can't really believe they want to do this."

The EPA's own Web site touts the chemical inventory's benefits, boasting that "communities have more power to hold companies accountable and make informed decisions about how toxic chemicals are managed."

The agency puts the data on its Web site, and with a few clicks of a computer mouse anyone can find information about specific industries and plants or about 650 different chemicals. The data can be ranked nationwide or by state, county, city and ZIP code.

When residents in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood wanted to know if metallic-tasting smoke churning through the streets was dangerous, they turned to the EPA's database for answers.

What they found while scrolling through the list of polluters alarmed them: The H. Kramer and Co. smelter at 21st and Throop Streets is the largest source of airborne lead in the Chicago area.

Organized into a small but tenacious group, the plant's neighbors started badgering elected officials and environmental

regulators, prompting a state investigation that found high levels of lead in several backyards.

While H. Kramer denies it is responsible for lead in the neighborhood, the company has agreed to clean up its property and reduce its emissions.

"What the EPA is talking about is really disturbing," said Karen Sheets, spokeswoman for the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization.

In Colorado, researchers used the database to reveal that chemical releases are more concentrated in the Rocky Mountain states than in the country as a whole.

A Brush Wellman alloy factory outside Toledo, Ohio, cut emissions of beryllium, a toxic metal, after environmental groups used the EPA inventory to highlight the company's releases. A similar campaign led a Rohm and Haas chemical plant near Cincinnati to reduce airborne chloromethane, which the EPA considers a possible carcinogen.

The annual reports of chemical releases already are two years old by the time the information is made public. Critics of the proposed changes say moving the reports to once every other year would make it more difficult to pressure industries to keep reducing emissions.

The vast majority of chemical releases still would be made public, Nelson said. For instance, the proposal would affect only 3 percent of the nationwide emissions of trichloroethylene, a cancer-causing chemical known as TCE.

For some chemicals, though, the number of companies required to report releases would drop significantly, meaning information about some polluters would not be available to nearby communities. Nearly half of the companies that reported TCE emissions during 2003 no longer would be required to do so, according to a Chicago Tribune review of the database.

"I thought the idea was to give people more information, not less, about factories in their cities and neighborhoods," said Sandy Buchanan, executive director of Ohio Citizen Action.

Under the 1986 law that created the chemical inventory, the EPA must inform Congress of proposed changes at least a year in advance. The rules would take effect unless challenged by lawmakers or the public.

Business groups are lining up behind the change. "This sensible update will provide relief to small manufacturers and free up resources for addressing critical environmental priorities," John Engler, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, said in a statement.

But while industry generally supports the changes, some companies say they don't think the annual reporting requirement is too burdensome.

"It's just a normal part of how we do business," said Jeannine Sohayda, spokeswoman for Dow Chemical Co. "We built it into our reporting systems a long time ago."

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