

Coalition to Prevent Chemical Disasters

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Community, Public Health, and Labor Leaders Urge Federal Agencies to Prevent Chemical Disasters at Newark Hearing

Newark, NJ – Today, residents, community, labor, and environmental leaders gathered at a federal listening session to push the Obama administration to take bold steps to reduce the danger posed to millions of people by high-risk chemical facilities in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area. The listening session implements, in part, an [Executive Order](#) from President Obama issued after accidents such as the tragedy in West, TX that killed 14 people and injured 200, and the 2012 vinyl chloride spill in Paulsboro, NJ that evacuated the town and sent dozens to the hospital.

“With millions of New Jerseyans and New Yorkers at risk, we can’t wait for another disaster to take action,” said Jen Kim, NJPIRG State Director. “The bottom line is that the EPA can increase safety right now by requiring the use of feasible safer alternatives in high-risk chemical facilities.”

The listening session, hosted by the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Homeland Security and Occupational Safety and Health Administration, is one of over a dozen taking place nationwide. Today representatives from groups including NJPIRG, NJ Work Environment Council (WEC), United Steelworkers, and the Sierra Club, joined local residents to call on the Obama Administration to include a robust safety approach known as “IST”—inherently safer technology—which would minimize the risks posed by storing and transporting toxic chemicals.

In 2009, Clorox Company announced the phase out of the use of dangerous chlorine at their bleach manufacturing facilities and adopted a safer liquid alternative. Such standards would greatly reduce the risks of another disaster like the chemical spill in West Virginia that poisoned drinking water for hundreds of thousands of residents.

“We know from our experience that the most effective way to address chemical disasters is to prevent them from happening in the first place. That’s why we need the US Environmental Protection Agency to issue policies to require industry to use the safest chemicals and processes, wherever feasible. This is the most effective way to protect workers, emergency responders, and communities”, said Debra Coyle McFadden, Assistant Director of NJ WEC.

Also released at the event were new [maps](#) of the New York/New Jersey region that show the dangers high risk facilities in the Newark area pose to New Jersey’s most vulnerable populations: children. Utilizing official EPA data, the maps show the number of schools and students that lie within one mile of a high-risk facility. Children with developing immune systems are more susceptible to harmful chemical effects and those within vulnerability zones are at risk of illness, injury or even death in the event of a toxic accident.

According to the Center for Effective Government, who produced the [maps](#) based on facility reports, of the 76 high-risk facilities in NJ currently registered under the EPA's Risk Management Program:

- 68 schools lie within one mile of a high-risk chemical facility in NJ
- 34,641 students attend schools that would potentially be in danger in the event of a toxic release
- There are 12 schools within one mile of a high-risk facility in the Jersey City area, with up to 6,112 students at potential risk.
- The Linden-area, which borders the Turnpike, has 9 schools and 4,777 students within one mile of a high-risk facility.
- Chemical facilities in the Camden-area (including Paulsboro) have 7 schools and 2,672 students at potential risk.

Trisha Sheehan, a Woodbury, NJ resident with Moms Clean Air Force for New Jersey, lives just a few miles from Paulsboro, NJ, where in November 2012 a train derailed and spilled 30,000 pounds of toxic vinyl chloride into the community. "I'm concerned about the health of my children," said Sheehan. "I was told to shelter in place and not evacuate but my six-year old complained of his throat burning and his eyes watered constantly. The EPA should take action so my family and others aren't harmed by dangerous chemicals."

There are 10 high-risk facilities in New Jersey that each put at least 100,000 residents within "vulnerability zones" for toxic exposure in the case of an accident or terrorist attack. For example, the Kuehne plant in Kearny, NJ could place up to 12 million New Jersey and New York residents at risk if there were a spill or accident, due to its use of chlorine gas. (Management of this facility says they are converting to a process that uses less chlorine, but have not provided a schedule of when this work will be completed.)

Del Vitale, Sub-District Director for USW District 4 in Edison, NJ said "The United Steelworkers strongly supports a move to safer chemicals and processes wherever feasible in order to protect workers and the surrounding communities. We urge these federal agencies to update and strengthen regulations and policies to make this happen."

"It is critical for EPA to develop comprehensive rules to make our chemical facilities safer. The EPA needs to come up with plans and rules working with people, communities, worker in factories, first responders, and management to make sure these facilities become safer. By making these plants safer it also reduces pollution. This is especially important since the Christie Administration cut back enforcement and inspection putting the environment and more people are risk," said Jeff Tittel, Director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

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The Coalition to Prevent Chemical Disasters comprises more than 100 health, labor, environment, environmental justice, public health and public interest organizations who are calling on the Obama Administration to improve chemical facility safety and security and require chemical facilities to use safer chemicals and processes where available and affordable. For more information, visit <http://preventchemicaldisasters.org>.

NJPIRG, the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group, is a statewide, non-partisan, non-profit consumer advocacy organization. For more information or to see the maps online go to www.njpirg.org or follow @njpirg.

The NJ Work Environment Council (WEC) is a coalition of 70 labor, environmental, and community organizations. For more information go to: www.njwec.org.