Breathing Room for Business, in a Bubble

Hard times can be especially hard on the environment. When jobs are at stake, the stench of dirty air can seem sweet. That is why regulatory reforms just announced by the Environmental Protection Agency are especially timely. By embracing the so-called "bubble" concept, the agency is offering private enterprise a new way to control air pollution effectively at far lower cost than standard regulatory techniques.

The bubble is so sensible an idea that one wonders why it took so long to surface. Under Federal law, the E.P.A. must set ambient air quality standards — what's safe to breathe, and where. It is then up to the states to design plans to meet these standards and enforce them, stack by stack. But the trouble with this strategy is that it is wasteful, costing much more than necessary per ton of gunk removed from the air. Stack-by-stack enforcement also virtually guarantees that the process will remain wasteful, acting as a powerful brake on private initiative in discovering new cleanup technologies.

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Consider, for example, an auto manufacturing complex spewing hydrocarbon fumes from a dozen different sources. The way things now work, the regulators fix limits on emissions from each source. But under the bubble approach, which E.P.A. now officially encourages, the auto company will be told how much it will be permitted in total emissions from a hypothetical "bubble" surrounding the entire complex.

That gives the company an opportunity to offset emissions that are particularly expensive to contain by improving controls at other sources. In the case of the auto maker, the company might give up trying to control the fumes produced by rust-proofing steel parts, but, in compensation, install a new system for drying paint. The concept also gives the engineers who know the plant best — those who run it — an enduring incentive to figure out cheaper solutions. Rather than having to renegotiate every modification of their equipment, the plant's managers can try any approach that meets the overall pollution standard.

Just how much may be saved by the bubble concept is suggested by a Du Pont Company analysis. Du Pont spends $136 million a year to comply with air-quality regulations. With bubbles, the chemical company figures it can do the same job for $55 million. Cost-cutting innovation specifically encouraged by the bubble policy would save still more.

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But E.P.A. alone can't make bubbles work. That requires the cooperation of state regulators. No less important, the reforms depend on changing the attitudes of the regulated. Du Pont and other large, research-oriented companies are eager to be left to find their own solutions to environmental problems. Many polluters, however, are trapped by their view of government as enemy, having long ago forgotten that the goal is clean air at minimum cost, not some license to pollute.

In a survey of 48 member companies, the Business Roundtable found that 77 percent of their costs of Federal regulation were associated with the environment. Simply maintaining current air quality standards could easily mean increased expenditures in coming years as more polluters compete for a fixed amount of biosphere, and as the economy increasingly relies on dirtier, homegrown fuels for power. The bubble is a way of fighting back.

NONS 008879

Date 12-6-79

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D11

18 Small PCB Leaks Discovered At Bethlehem Corporation Plant

BALTIMORE, Dec. 5 (AP) — The Bethlehem Steel Corporation has found 18 small leaks of toxic PCB's at its Sparrows Point steel plant, according to a report the company sent to state environmental officials.

The leaks were described as "minor" by Leroy Jonas, regional chief of enforcement for the Water Resources Administration, who released the details of Bethlehem's report yesterday.

"This does not mean that there are PCB's all over the place," he said. He added that his agency would probably not recommend any fines or action against the steel company because "the way they've explained it, there doesn't appear to be a problem."

The Federal Government has banned most uses of PCB's, or polychlorinated biphenyls, because of the health risk involved in their use. The chemical compounds, found to cause cancer in rats, may still be used in insulating fluids contained in electrical equipment.

The State Water Resources Administration asked Bethlehem to survey its electrical equipment after the discovery of a small PCB spill at the plant in October.