viewpoints
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Chemical companies battle a bill to clean up chemical disaster's

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WASHINGTON — The chemical and oil industries have begun a subtle but well-targeted campaign to kill a Senate bill that would make them help pay to clean up chemical disasters and compensate victims of incidents like the one at New York's Love Canal.

So far, only a trickle of letters in support of the bill has come from the millions of homeowners, farmers and fishermen who potentially could benefit from the victim compensation sections of the embattled legislation.

"There's been no groundswell of public support ... to offset the massive campaign being waged by the chemical industry," said a staffer for the Senate Environment Committee "Unless people are sitting near a chemical dump, they won't write. As a result, the lobbying is very lopsided right now."

One industry spokesman, Shell Oil lobbyist Bill Lowrey, said, "We are opposing it with everything we've got." He called the bill "a radical rewriting of all environmental laws."

The bill would establish a $4.1 billion fund to clean up chemical contamination and compensate victims when the responsible company can't be found, or won't pay. Industry would pay nearly 88 percent of the cost; the federal government would pay the difference.

Nicknamed the "superfund" bill, it is being considered by the Senate Finance and Commerce committees, and may come up for a final vote by the full Senate before Congress adjourns Oct. 4. Industry favors less costly House legislation.

Staffers of Senate supporters of the legislation complained they were not hearing from the sport hunting, fishing and recreational groups who suffer when lakes and rivers are destroyed by chemical pollution.

Other potential victims of chemical contamination — the agricultural groups representing pork and beef producers and dairy farmers — also have been silent on the issue, according to the staffers.

"Those groups usually carry a lot of weight with senators, because they could suffer economic and job losses in a chemical incident," one staffer said. "We're trying to get them to come forward."

A 1979 incident in which $2.7 million worth of poultry and egg products in 19 states had to be destroyed because of PCB contamination from a Montana feed processing plant is an example of the kind of chemical incident that would be covered by the bill. Producers who lost income due to the destruction of agricultural products would be able to file a claim against the superfund, if the bill were passed.

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