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Going after the 'superfund'

The Monsanto Co. recently sent a letter to about 40,000 of its shareholders. Included in the letter were the names and addresses of the shareholders' senators and representatives and a plea from the giant chemical company. That plea: protest to Congress that the so-called "superfund" bill represents "overkill." The letters from the stockholders poured in to Washington.

A lobbyist for Shell Oil Co. says his company is opposing the superfund legislation "with everything we've got."

Officials of Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corp., the firm responsible for dumping the poisonous chemicals that have contaminated New York's Love Canal neighborhood, recently wrote members of Congress asserting that there is no evidence that the chemicals disposed of in Love Canal produced any adverse health effects to residents of the area.

As both the Senate and House proceed with their versions of the bills, the oil and chemical industry is working overtime to weaken the legislation which requires the industry to contribute toward the cleanup of chemical spills and abandoned waste disposal sites. The Senate measure also provides for compensation of individuals who suffer an economic loss due to toxic waste accidents.

Proponents of strong legislation have not yet mustered a vigorous counter-campaign, according to Senate staff members working on passage of the bill there. Environmental lobbyists claim they have exhausted much of their funds on this summer's protracted and intensive Alaska lands debate, recently completed in the Senate, and now must regroup before undertaking this effort.

Recently, an ABC/Harris poll showed that 86 percent of the American public believe that toxic chemical disposal deserves a "very high priority" for federal action. That public attitude undoubtedly has evolved as a result of the large number of reports of illegal waste dump sites, chemical spills and contamination of rivers and streams by hazardous pollutants.

It is unlikely that Congress will complete work on the superfund bill before the Oct. 4 recess. However, the growing prospects for a lame-duck session mean that some legislation might end up on President Carter's desk before the end of the year. Of the various bills now in Congress, the Senate bill is far superior. It establishes a $4.1 billion fund, financed through surcharges on products, to clean up chemical contamination and holds chemical firms liable for damages to the environment and individuals.

Contrary to the industry's claims, it is not "overkill." It is holding the industry responsible for a problem largely of its own making.

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