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EPA Plans Would Shield Polluters from Public Accountability

Statement by Sean Moulton, Senior Policy Analyst, OMB Watch
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The Environmental Protection Agency could not have sent a clearer message about its priorities as dictated by the White House: corporate interests before public health and safety. On September 21, EPA officials announced plans to roll back our nation's premier tool for citizens seeking information on toxic pollution released into their communities. The agency proposed dramatically reducing industry reporting requirements under its Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) program and plans to cut the program in half by switching to reporting every other year from the current annual program.

The TRI program provides detailed information annually about toxic chemicals released by U.S. facilities into their surroundings. Citizens groups are thus able to call for improvements and local governments are able to reduce and adequately respond to risks. The TRI is widely recognized as among the most effective environmental programs ever enacted; from 1998 to 2003 the TRI program spurred companies to cut annual toxic pollution by 2.8 billion pounds.

The current EPA leadership, however, seems more concerned with sparing companies a bit of paperwork than it is with protecting the public, proposing to:

- Cut the program in half by switching to every other year reporting for all facilities;
- Allow companies to release *ten times* more pollution before filing detailed reports;
- Create an unprecedented exemption for reporting low-level disposals of persistent bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs), including lead and mercury, which have been proven to be dangerous even in the smallest quantities.

These changes will leave thousands of communities at greater risk from toxic chemicals. Environmental groups, first responders, workers and public officials are now calling on EPA to abandon the plan. Today they released a state-by-state analysis detailing the risks the plan poses to emergency preparedness.

Unfortunately, these unwise changes, while the most egregious, are only the latest in a series of recent actions by EPA that have systematically weakened the TRI program. OMB Watch released a report today, entitled "Dismantling the Public's Right to Know," outlining EPA's assault on this cornerstone environmental program that has so successfully held companies accountable for their toxic waste.

After almost 20 years of progress, EPA wants to make it easier for corporations to pollute. The toxic soup left in Hurricane Katrina's wake illustrated the need for more, not less, information about dangerous chemicals. Ultimately, families and workers will pay for EPA's refusal to learn this important lesson.

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"Dismantling the Public's Right to Know" is available at
www.ombwatch.org/pdfs/TRI_Report.pdf.