

The Environmental Hazards Next Door

by

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Today's growing awareness of indoor environmental hazards reminds me of an old Liza Minelli song -- the one about Shirley Devore, who "travelled 'round the world to meet the guy next door."

Since the first Earth Day over 20 years ago, the modern environmental movement has been fighting the problems caused by industrial pollution like acid rain, polluted rivers, and toxic waste dumps. These have been essential battles against compelling threats, producing landmark laws like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. The public has benefitted immeasurably from these efforts -- and will continue to benefit from future ones.

But like Shirley Devore discovering the guy next door, many environmental experts are now realizing that some of the greatest environmental threats to health are those closest to home. The new frontier for EPA has become the great indoors.

Our indoor pollution problems are serious and widespread. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, "the most common and societally devastating environmental disease of young children," lead poisoning, is caused by hazards hidden inside millions of American homes -- deteriorating lead paint, high levels of lead in household dust and soil, and contaminated drinking water. As many as 3 million young children -- one out of every six -- have enough lead in their blood from these sources to cause subtle brain damage, including a loss of IQ.

Another indoor environmental threat -- exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke -- is the third leading cause of premature death in the United States, killing over 50,000 Americans each year according to the Surgeon General. Secondhand smoke is also a severe threat to children, causing hundreds of thousands of cases of bronchitis and pneumonia each year. Up to a million asthmatic children suffer attacks when exposed to tobacco smoke.

One of these asthmatic children, nine-year-old Michelle Dart, told my Subcommittee earlier this year what exposure to secondhand smoke means to her: "I get dizzy, I start to sneeze, I can't breathe very well, and sometimes ... I get too much smoke in my lungs and go into the hospital." No air pollutant should ever be allowed to cause so much harm to an innocent child.

Yet a third indoor pollutant, radon gas that seeps into homes from soil, is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. According to EPA and CDC, it causes 14,000 lung cancer deaths each year -- more deaths than drowning and fires combined.

At last, Congress is responding to these indoor threats. An important precedent was set in 1992, when Congress enacted the Lead

Hazard Reduction Act, one of its first substantive efforts to address an indoor environmental threat. Under this law, home buyers and renters will, for the first time, be warned of hidden lead hazards before they move into a home. Moreover, home remodeling contractors and the burgeoning lead abatement industry will be licensed and regulated to prevent the creation of new lead hazards and insure the proper clean up of old ones.

This year, Congress has accelerated its efforts to safeguard the indoor environment, with three major pieces of legislation pending in the House. Under Administrator Carol Browner, EPA has become a full partner -- indeed, often a leader -- in these efforts.

The first bill, the Smoke-Free Environment Act of 1993 (H.R. 3434), would implement a new smoking policy announced by Administrator Browner in July. It would guarantee all Americans a smoke-free environment by prohibiting smoking in buildings accessible to the public, except in designated, separately ventilated smoking rooms.

H.R. 3434 is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. For virtually no cost, it would save tens of thousands of lives and protect hundreds of thousands of children each year -- not to mention reducing building fires and maintenance costs. By providing nationwide protection, the bill would eliminate thousands of needless battles for smoking restrictions at the local level.

The second bill, the Radon Awareness and Disclosure Act of 1993 (H.R. 2448), introduced by Rep. Ed Markey, uses ideas enacted in last year's lead law to reduce radon risks. Under its market-based approach, home buyers would be fully informed of the risks of radon and have an opportunity to conduct an inspection before signing any real estate contract. This approach has achieved considerable consensus, being supported by both the Consumers Federation of America and the National Association of Realtors.

The third bill, the Indoor Air Act of 1993 (H.R. 2919), introduced by Rep. Joe Kennedy, establishes a national framework for addressing indoor air problems other than secondhand smoke and radon. It calls upon EPA to identify common indoor air hazards (which may be either high levels of individual pollutants or faulty ventilation systems) and then issue guidelines for identifying, eliminating, and preventing these hazards. If the voluntary guidelines do not succeed in protecting the public, EPA would have the authority to take appropriate regulatory action.

For the third Congress in a row, Senator Mitchell's indoor air bill (S. 656) has passed the Senate. H.R. 2919 finally provides a viable legislative vehicle for House action.

Beyond these important measures, Congress should also enact comprehensive legislation to improve indoor environments in schools and day care centers. Although children are especially susceptible

to environmental hazards, recent hearings of my Subcommittee have found that many schools and day care centers harbor hidden environmental hazards. In New York City, for instance, thousands of classrooms -- nearly one out of every four -- has a lead hazard. Nationwide, one out of every five schools has at least one classroom with an elevated radon level.

For too long, federal environmental policy has overlooked the environmental hazards lurking in our homes, schools, and offices. For the sake of the millions of Americans afflicted by these contaminants, now is the time for a change.