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January 7, 2004

CHEMICAL SECURITY BILL

Safety is priority

The nation is on orange alert. Flights are being delayed and canceled. Increased security is taking a bite from the public treasury. But these are extraordinary times, and our priorities dramatically changed on Sept. 11, 2001. Right?

Well, not quite *everyone's* priorities. In Congress, sad to say, the demands of powerful industry lobbies can still take precedence over keeping the public safe from a terrorist attack.

Since October 2001, just one month after terrorists slammed planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., has been pushing for a federal law that would set strict standards for security at chemical plants. Corzine saw the real and horrifying potential for terrorists to release the lethal chemicals in these plants, many of which are located in New Jersey.

Industry opposition has kept the measure from being enacted.

Understand, that is not to say that New Jersey's chemical industry is doing nothing to beef up security. It is - if only through self-interest. And the state, too, has some control over chemical security; the chemical industry is one of 20 industrial sectors represented on a council that is setting and adopting what are known as "best security practices" for those sectors.

But Corzine is right to push for federal standards and to make compliance mandatory and across-the-board. His bill also contains \$50 million in incentives to help make investments in security.

And he unsuccessfully attempted to include \$80 million last summer in an appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security to conduct security assessments of chemical facilities across the country. The measure lost Republican support after heavy lobbying by the chemical industry, according to Corzine.

Just one extreme - but terrifying - example of the high stakes in this densely populated state: A 1999 risk-management plan filed by the Kuehne Chemical Co. in Kearny contained a worse-case scenario of a fully loaded railroad tank car releasing all of its chlorine within 10 minutes. The resulting cloud of chlorine vapor would be dangerous to life and health for a distance of 14 miles - a radius that contains *12 million people*.

In its report, Kuehne pointed out that such an incident has never happened and the scenario is "highly improbable."

But then again, everything changed on Sept. 11. Didn't it?

Safety should be the priority for Congress - not the wishes of the chemical industry. Corzine's bill makes sense.

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