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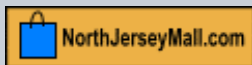
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OPINION

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Chemical targets

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Sunday, December 28, 2003

EDITORIAL BY THE RECORD

THE NEWS on The Record's front page last week should be a wake-up call: "N.J. chemical plants may be target."

Federal intelligence agencies recently distributed information they gathered that specifically mentions chemical plants in New Jersey as terrorist targets. The state says it has boosted security as part of the nation's heightened alert.

But there is a larger context here, and it's anything but reassuring. When it comes to chemical plants, security issues have basically been left to the industry.

On the federal level, Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., has been leading the charge for tighter security since shortly after Sept. 11, 2001. He has pointed out repeatedly that chemical plants are attractive targets because an attack could do so much harm to potentially hundreds of thousands of people living nearby. But his efforts to set substantive federal requirements for assessing and securing chemical plants against terrorist attacks have met with stiff resistance from the

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chemical industry.

Mr. Corzine spoke recently in the Senate about another chemical security bill under consideration - one that is far more industry-friendly than anything he has sponsored. It would require chemical plants to develop security plans and submit them to the Department of Homeland Security. But Mr. Corzine noted a major problem: "The bill doesn't require the department to do anything with them. DHS wouldn't have to review them. It wouldn't have to evaluate them. It wouldn't have to approve them. It wouldn't have to do a thing to ensure the public is protected. Instead, the department could simply let these plans sit on a back room shelf, collecting dust."

Unfortunately, that bill is favored by the Bush administration, which is said to be uninterested in any massive chemical-plant security plan. The chemical industry has lobbied heavily against strict regulation and appears to have the White House's ear.

On the state level, the McGreevey administration is considering a chemical plant security policy in the form of an agreement between the state and several chemical industry organizations. The draft of the plan would require chemical plants to follow a security code written by the American Chemistry Council, an industry group. The state would monitor compliance and regulate any plant that does not participate.

No decision has been made yet on whether to adopt this policy, but Mr. Corzine has already criticized it, saying it is not tough enough and basically amounts to the industry policing itself.

Mr. Corzine is a voice crying in the wilderness. According to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, at least eight facilities in New Jersey have the potential to release enough toxic chemicals if attacked to expose more than 1 million people in the surrounding area to dangerous fumes. Are local, state, and federal emergency teams and medical resources equipped to deal with that terrifying scenario?

The chemical industry is powerful, and it is determined to address

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PROJECT TEAM:

"Fighting for Air" is the result of eight months of work by a team of Record journalists. The project team includes:

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security voluntarily. That's simply not acceptable. Environmentalists say the Bush administration has been lulled into complacency by the industry's promises, leaving a gaping hole in national security.

Chemical plant security should be a top priority in New Jersey as well. An agreement that relies on industry standards may not have enough teeth to adequately protect the public.

It's amazing that more than two years since the World Trade Center attacks, so little has been done. The recent intelligence warnings should be more than just a reminder that the nation - and the state in particular - are vulnerable when it comes to chemical plant security. The warnings should be a call to action.

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