Train Sees New Toxic Substances Law as "Preventive Medicine"

[ EPA press release - October 21, 1976 ]

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell E. Train today stated that the recently enacted Toxic Substances Control Act is "one of the most important pieces of 'preventive medicine' legislation" ever passed by Congress. He said this is because "its basic aim is to give public health far more of the weight that it deserves in the decisions by which chemicals are commercially made and marketed, by which they enter and spread throughout the human environment."

Train stated that "I am determined that we administer this major public health law by the most explicitly open and inclusive process possible."

"Preventive medicine, of the kind the new law entails, brings together a broad and diverse mixture of actors and actions in a concerted and coordinated effort to reduce the health risks that individuals and society are exposed to," said Train in a speech before a meeting of the American Public Health Association held in Miami, Florida. The speech marks Train's first public comment on the new Act, which was signed into law by President Ford on October 11, 1976.

"The legislation represents a major step toward an increasingly effective preventive approach toward the 'environmental disease' that has been called the 'disease of the century,'" the Administrator said. "The new law gives EPA specific authority--which it earlier lacked--to move against both an old and a new chemical hazard. The first is one of the most frustrating and long-standing chemical problems we have faced--the problem of PCBs. The second is what I have called the first truly global environmental problem--the destruction of fluorocarbons of the ozone which screens the surface of the earth from harmful ultraviolet radiation."

Train said that in these and other actions he has "no doubt that such an effort will proceed far more rapidly--with far less legal and other detours and delays--if we take the trouble from the very start to make sure we know what we are doing--to make sure everyone interested and affected is a real part of the process--than it would if we acted on the assumption that we were engaged in an adversary process, that we need consult only with the law itself or with those whom we are required by law to consult."

"A preventive effort of this sort cuts across all sectors and segments of the society," Train said. "It involves a 'political' process in the best sense of that phrase--an orderly, open and inclusive process that, without undue delay, leads to decisions and actions that are effective and acceptable because all important views and values have been considered, because all affected and interested parties have taken part and because the relevant evidence and expertise have been considered and consulted."
Referring to toxic environmental contamination, Train said that our major problem is that "we know so little--so abysmally little--about these chemicals. We know little about their health effects, especially over the long term at low levels of exposure. We know little about how many humans are exposed, and how and to what degree. We do not even know precisely how many--much less precisely which--new chemical compounds are made and marketed every year."

"It is precisely because we know so little about all these things, because we must balance risks against benefits as well as costs against benefits, and because we must draw upon as much outside expertise and advice as we can, that the kind of 'political' process I have described is essential in any successful effort to reduce chemical risks while preserving their benefits," Train said.

The Administrator noted that "we have done much over the past several years to improve the regulatory process at EPA--in particular, to make it far more open and equitable. "It is along these lines that we would exercise our authority under toxic substances legislation. By the time the law becomes effective on January 1 next year, we will, as result of this process, be ready to start carrying out our responsibilities under the law openly and effectively, with maximum public review and involvement."