



Where's the Worker?

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Dear Subscriber,

Ever question why EPA is flush with cash, a budget of \$8.4 billion in fiscal year 2004, with a payroll of 17,850 employees — while OSHA scrapes by with \$457.5 million and 2,236 employees?

That's right, EPA's budget is roughly 18 times the size of OSHA's; its workforce about eight times as large.

No wonder a corporate EHS needs assessment survey conducted for the American Industrial Hygiene Association found environmental expertise to be in demand much more than safety and industrial hygiene specialists.

In this edition of ISHN's e-newsletter, we examine why the power and the glory go to environmental issues, with safety work often going to ill-trained part-timers or volunteer committees.

WORLDS APART

Other indicators of the yawning gap between the country's environmental and safety attitudes:

- EPA's administrator sits in on cabinet meetings. Lands on magazine covers. Attends global environmental summits. OSHA's boss announces alliances. Knows the handful of safety trade press editors by name. Attends meetings like the Workplace Safety Summit, cancelled by organizers after two years for lack of interest.
- At the end of 2002, 49,462 ISO 14001 environmental management standard certificates had been issued in 118 countries — up 34.5 percent over 2001. Meanwhile, a safety and health management standard is but a gleam in ISO's eye.
- Can you name a grassroots worker safety advocacy group? Enviro groups publish their own calendars and magazines.
- When was the last time a U.S. president mentioned OSHA in a speech? Or Gallup polled voters on workplace safety issues?

To find out why this huge chasm exists between high-profile green issues and back-burner blue collar safety, all you needed was a front row seat at a press event last week in Washington.

In the ground floor gallery of The Wilderness Society, surrounded by Ansel Adams prints, the Coalition of Citizens for Sensible Safeguards picked apart the Bush administration's health, safety and environmental record for two hours.

<http://www.ishn.com/CDA/ArticleInformation/coverstory/BNPCoverStoryItem/0,2164,97914,00.html>

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Cliches flew fast and furious. Regs are being rolled back. The enforcement cop is off duty. The fox is in the hen house. The playing field is tilted. The standards spigot is turned off. Political commissars pull all the string at reg agencies. Career civil servants are exiled to bureaucratic Siberia.

But almost none of the 125 coalition members have anything to do with job safety. Green is the color of the coalition.

Groups include Environmental Health Watch, Environmental Integrity Project, Environmental Media Services, Friends of the Earth, Earthworks, Greenpeace, National Environmental Trust, Sierra Club, Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, Alliance for Healthy Homes, Clean Water Action, Clean Air Trust Education Fund, and the Children's Environmental Health Network.

The AFL-CIO is a member, but the only group with "safety" in its name is the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, based in New York City.

Worker safety was barely mentioned by speakers, except for an ex-OSHA staffer and a former MSHA official in a panel discussion at the end of the program. Star power was provided by former EPA administrator Carol Browner, who offered introductory remarks. Dr. Philip J. Landrigan, director of the Center for Children's Health and the Environment at Mount Sinai School of Medicine gave the keynote speech.

Children's health and the environment — not workplace safety — was the theme of the day.

ROOT CAUSE

So why, at this press event, was the spotlight on asthma, neurodevelopmental disorders and birth defects — not trench cave-ins, confined space asphyxiation, or punch press amputations?

Keep asking "why" enough times and you'll get close to the root cause. Let's try it. For starters, why are governors recruited to EPA's top job — and mid-level corporate types and career bureaucrats to OSHA's?

(EPA has landed state governors as its last two administrators, Christie Whitman of New Jersey and now Michael Leavitt of Utah. OSHA's most recent bosses have been a state OSHA program director, Charles Jeffress, and the EHS director of a phosphorus chemicals supplier with 550 employees, John Henshaw.)

Because the EPA job gets you in the news and on talk shows, at the table with the President, and a bigger budget to play with.

Why?

Because EPA penalties are much steeper than OSHA's. Environmental liabilities are much more of a concern to corporations — and countries — than injuries and fatalities.

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Why?

Because the environment is more of a concern to voters, homeowners, parents, investors, politicians, reporters and think tanks than what goes on in workplaces.

Why?

Because everyone breathes air and drinks water. Because when smog settles in over the Grand Canyon, everyone sees it.

When an employee loses a finger at work, only his coworkers and family know. When a worker dies, it's usually buried on the back page in the newspaper.

Why?

Risk communications consultant Peter Sandman has a list of 12 factors that influence public outrage. In Sandman's framework, workplace hazards are likely to be seen by the public, press and politicians as voluntary, fair, familiar, individually controlled, and something to be not dreaded.

Think about it. No one forces employees to take risks on the job — they are free to leave and find other work.

Workplace risks are familiar, everyone has a story about a friend, neighbor or relative who got dinked on the job, maybe lost a finger or their hearing, threw out their back.

Job-related risks are believed to be within the control of the individual — if he wears his PPE, follows the rules, and pays attention, chances are he won't get hurt.

A risk that's familiar and controllable is not something to be dreaded.

All in all, these risks faced by workers seem relatively fair and discretionary — since the worker can take another job and protect himself.

But environmental risks are coerced, something forced upon us. We don't accept pollution exposures voluntarily. If our air or water is dirty, what options do we have? It's not fair. Especially when kids are at risk.

Kids are so vulnerable, said Dr. Landrigan at the Washington press conference. "Children today are surrounded by thousands and thousands of toxic chemicals," he said. These toxins are not familiar to kids, they're beyond the control of the kids to do anything about them. Now this is very unfair. Outrageous. A source of dread.

(Many workers are surrounded by toxins, too. But in theory, they receive hazcom training, can avail themselves of MSDSs, and can don respirators.)

One hundred years ago, factory conditions did generate outrage, in large measure because working kids were suffering. Kids who at risk tug at emotions, sell papers, even sway votes.

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"I can give you the names of victims' families," one of the Washington event organizers, Gary Bass, told reporters after he told the story of a six-year-old girl who got violently ill from e coli bacteria in barbecued hamburger.

Barbecued hamburger, now that's something reporters and their readers can relate to. A workplace hazard like a confined space? Few reporters or their readers have ever ventured there.

SCORING POINTS

Last week's Washington press event used six-year-olds, children, not adult workers, to score points with the press.

"We going to have one, two, or three generations of children harmed by the lack of regulating mercury," said Carol Browner.

"Our children are breathing bad air and eating unsafe food," she said.

"Kids are inherently more sensitive," said Dr. Landrigan. "They face a lifetime of risk for chronic disease."

The last slide in his PowerPoint presentation showed the heads of two small children peering above a rusted 55-gallon drum. "This is why we're here," concluded Dr. Landrigan.

Safety pros vent at times when they see environmental protection getting the budget, staff, clout, headlines, ISO standards, global summits and corner offices. But look no further than a yellow school bus or a playground. Think of Peter Sandman's hazards and risks that generate heat. Environment bests safety hands down in the battle for the hearts and minds of the public.

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