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Editorials

Thwarted on chemical threat

Friday, May 28, 2004

Sen. Jon Corzine must feel a bit like Cassandra, the tortured Trojan princess blessed with the power of prophecy and cursed by a spell that ensured no one would believe her.

She warned the Trojans about the horse. Corzine has been wearing himself out warning America about the vulnerability of its chemical plants to terrorist attacks. And he's gotten nowhere.

It is fitting that Corzine should take up this cause because New Jersey has more than its share of dangerous chemicals. According to an estimate by the Environmental Protection Agency, seven industrial sites near population centers in New Jersey store enough toxic materials to injure more than 1 million people if the terrorists do their job well. If you're reading this editorial, one of them is virtually certain to be within range of you.

As we approach the third anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, the federal government has done nothing to secure these sites. Congress is still debating. The Department of Homeland Security hasn't written safety standards, let alone moved to enforce them.

With 15,000 vulnerable facilities around the country, nothing we do will guarantee our protection. Corzine understands that, which is why his bill would ask the Department of Homeland Security to begin with the most dangerous plants. His bill would require these companies to devise safety plans for department approval and to switch to safer products when practical. His bill won bipartisan approval in committee last year.

But his success awakened industry lobbyists. Soon, a competing bill was offered by GOP Sen. James Inhofe that would take the teeth out of Corzine's approach. It would ask companies to file safety plans but would not require the Department of Homeland Security to read them. Inhofe, incredibly, says the department doesn't have enough staff for that. His bill would favor voluntary measures and would not press companies to switch to safer products. Republican leaders in the House have not even gotten that far.

A fire at a chemical plant outside Atlanta this week offered a reminder of the danger. Burning chlorine pellets produced a toxic cloud that forced thousands

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to evacuate, closed a major highway for hours and sent dozens of people to hospital emergency rooms with inflamed lungs and burning eyes.

There is little chance that Congress or the White House will produce a safety plan with teeth. Rest assured, though, they will form a commission to study the reasons we didn't act if one of the plants is targeted.

For now, keep the duct tape handy.

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