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December 5, 2004 Sunday
Correction Appended
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HEADLINE: Changes May Be Needed In **Superfund**, Chief Says

BYLINE: By MICHAEL JANOFSKY

DATELINE: WASHINGTON, Dec. 4

BODY:

The head of the nation's **Superfund** program says that fundamental changes in the program may be necessary to continue cleanups as more contaminated sites demand attention and federal resources remain flat.

Thomas P. Dunne, an assistant administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency who oversees the **Superfund**, said pressures on the program's annual cleanup budget of \$450 million and the growing list of sites to be restored were strangling the program's ability to operate effectively. A new report by the agency predicted that as many as 355,000 hazardous waste sites could require cleanup over the next three decades, at a cost of up to \$250 billion.

As a result, Mr. Dunne said the time had come for "a frank, open and nonpartisan discussion" to balance public expectations for action and budgetary realities that make timely responses increasingly less likely.

"We will continue to operate within the constraints of what we've got," Mr. Dunne said Friday in an interview. "We intend to be open and transparent. But these are some things people can chew on, and we'll see what happens."

The agency's budget for Superfund cleanups has not changed in the last few years. Since 1995, when Congress did not renew a special tax on polluters, the cleanup money has come entirely from taxpayers.

President Bush sought no increase in the fund three years ago, and Congress has rebuffed his requests to increase the budget by \$150 million in each of the last two years. Recent program reviews by the environmental agency's inspector general have cited the need for hundreds of millions of dollars more to meet a growing backlog of sites.

In that context, Mr. Dunne, in a speech on Thursday, proposed three ways to ease the pressure on the budget and, perhaps, to lower expectations of community groups eager to eliminate contaminated sites in their neighborhoods.

One, Mr. Dunne said, is to seek private businesses that may have an economic interest in a restored site to help defray cleanup costs.

Another would be to create a management system for the program in which large sites that ate up more than half the Superfund budget were separated from smaller sites. The change, he said, would give communities a more realistic picture of how much help they could expect and when.

A third idea he proposed was halting the listing of more contaminated sites until current work is completed.

"I'm not necessarily advocating for these ideas," Mr. Dunne said in an interview. "I want to get them on the table for discussion and debate."

It is unclear, however, whether Congress may be immediately willing to contemplate reorganizing the Superfund program.

Senator James M. Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who is chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, "looks forward to looking at these proposals in the future," said his spokesman, Will Hart, who added: "They're interesting ideas, especially the first one. Senator Inhofe has definitely said he would welcome market-based approaches to solving problems."

But critics of the program say the real problem facing the Superfund program is an apparent lack of political will among Republicans in the White House and Congress to push for increasing its budget.

"These ideas are not a solution, but a diversion from the real problem, which is the failure of the administration and the Republican-controlled Congress to properly fund Superfund site cleanups," said Representative John D. Dingell, a Michigan Democrat who is the ranking member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, which has jurisdiction over the Superfund.

Senator James M. Jeffords, a Vermont independent who is the ranking member of Mr. Inhofe's committee, also dismissed Mr. Dunne's ideas, saying, "We should be working to protect our environment and public health by cleaning up more sites, faster, rather than shirking our responsibilities."

Mr. Dunne said that he was not wedded to any of his proposed changes. Nor, he said, is he asking for a bigger Superfund budget. He emphasized, however, that the program could accomplish only so much without a budget increase. He conceded this was unlikely, even as the number of sites needing cleanup is increasing by an average of 28 daily.

On any day, over 500 cleanup projects are under way and hundreds await work, but reflecting frustrations faced by communities on the waiting list, 9 of the biggest projects, known as megasites, account for 52 percent of the budget.

In the speech on Thursday at a Superfund seminar in Charlottesville, Va., Mr. Dunne said: "Because of these painful realities, we need to undertake a broader, more strategic discussion of our future options. We need fresh thinking about how we manage the program."

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

CORRECTION-DATE: December 7, 2004

CORRECTION:

Because of an editing error, an article on Sunday about a warning by Thomas P. Dunne, the head of the nation's

Superfund program, that changes in the project may be needed because more contaminated sites need attention referred incorrectly to the rate of increase of those areas to be cleaned. It is an average of 28 a year, not 28 each day.

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