Opinion

All Polluters Must Pay

IN YET ANOTHER Bush gift to industry, the Administration has announced its intent to eliminate the Superfund tax that pays for cleanup of abandoned hazardous waste sites. In other words, instead of “polluter pays,” Bush is advocating a policy of “consumer pays.” Although the specter of government absolving industry of responsibility for past pollution is reprehensible, our indignation should be moderated by our complicity. Shouldn’t a major portion of the burden rest on the end users—namely, the consumers? Although not a popular notion, a true policy of “polluter pays” would implicate both consumers and producers in shared responsibility for the environmental fallout of our lifestyle choices and purchasing demands.

Hazardous wastes are part and parcel of an industrialized economy. Recently, industry has concentrated efforts to minimize production of these wastes, but we must live with the legacy of past industrial activity for years to come. A major component of EPA’s Superfund program was designed to remediate orphan sites (where responsible parties cannot be identified, cannot pay, or resist taking responsibility), financed by revenue from feedstock taxes on industry. It seems only fair that the costs of remediating orphan Superfund sites should be distributed across the entire industrial sector, which collectively enjoyed larger profits through the then-standard practice of ignoring environmental impacts.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a rationale that can exculpate industrial entities from sharing in responsibility for past actions. If the most noble definition of engineering is the application of science in the service of humanity, then certainly industrial enterprises of the past that have stood on the shoulders of engineers to see the profits of the distant horizon must share in the responsibility for the ill-informed misapplication of science to profit from humanity’s (especially Americans’) penchant for a consumptive lifestyle.

It should be remembered that industry’s raison d’être is responding to consumer demand. In a nation where we utilize a disproportionately share of global resources and simultaneously pride ourselves on our technological acumen, we, as individuals, should stand ready to accept the consequences of our lifestyle. Indeed, if everyone lived like Americans, we would need three planet earths to support our standard of living. Although we like to view ourselves as more environmentally conscious than our forebears, we continue to lead a paradoxical and conflicted existence. We demand regulation of industrial discharges in the parts per million or parts per billion, while our ever-increasing affluence allows us to apply pounds per parcel of pesticides—chemicals that would otherwise be considered hazardous—directly on our backyards in search of the perfect lawn. Consumers rarely fully pay for the consequences of production and use, which include human and ecosystem health effects. In fact, a relatively recent paper in the journal Nature estimated ecosystem costs that appear on no corporate balance sheet in the trillions of dollars per year.

To avoid future Love Canals, consumers and industry alike have a collective obligation to take a transgenerational and holistic approach to production and consumption. Yet the designers of industrial processes and their products are rarely prepared to fully consider the environmental consequences of their actions. The engineers of tomorrow must be ready to blend the potential of technology with the highest aspirations of humanity and lead our society toward a sustainable future. Even when this approach becomes a reality, we as individuals must not abdicate our responsibility to participate actively in guiding environmentally sound technological decisions for the future.

The Bush Administration should strongly reconsider the ill-advised decision to let industry off the hook. At the same time, our individual and collective consciences should not allow us to delude ourselves into thinking we can buy and consume and discard—and never pay the price.

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