

Interview Paul Hill National Institute for Chemical Studies

Paul Hill is president and chief executive of the National Institute for Chemical Studies, a nonprofit group dedicated to providing government, industry and the public with information concerning toxic chemicals. He is also one of three presidential appointees to the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, commissioned in the 1990 Clean Air Act to investigate the causes of chemical accidents in the United States.

Four years ago, you were appointed by President Clinton to the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board. What purpose is the Board intended to serve?

The Chemical Safety Board is to investigate chemical accidents and make recommendations, helping to prevent tragic accidents in the future by changing trainings or technologies or technology management. The board is also supposed to make recommendations to federal agencies, the Clinton administration and to Congress about how to modify public policies over the years, relative to the board's findings.

Last year, Congress and the President failed to submit a budget for the Board. Why?

For a number of years after the passage of the Clean Air Act, there had been budgets submitted on behalf of the Bush administration to fund the Safety Board. But when they got

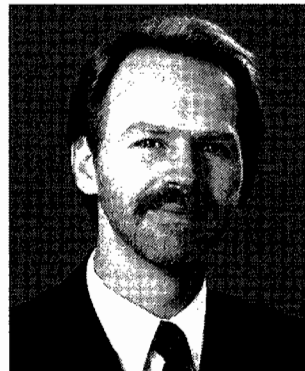
around to making appointments, myself included, the funds were rescinded. I guess someone looked at the budget and said, "The Safety Board is not operational yet. Let's rescind their funds because they won't need them until next year." But the [Clinton] administration did not put any funding in for us in subsequent years, even though the three appointed board members have asked for it.

Are you doing anything to get funding for the board?

All I can do is advise constituents on the situation. That is, if people ask me about the status of the board, I can tell them that legally, under the Clean Air Act, the board still exists. However, there are no funds to operate it. I have related to Congress and the Clinton Administration that I'm still very much interested and willing to perform the administration of the Safety Board. I think it is an important job. But ultimately, constituents and their representatives in Congress will have to decide if they will seek to fund the Board.

What could the Safety Board do that EPA, OSHA or other existing federal agencies are not able to do in the effort to stop chemical accidents?

There are restrictions on what these agencies can look at, or recommend, when they go into a facil-



ity. The Safety Board, however, was chartered to look more broadly at a facility and make recommendations about issues that have thus far been unaddressed. It takes the entire safety effort to a higher plane by looking at what may have been off-limits to EPA and OSHA in the past, helping to provide new insights to better improve safety.

Why is it important for the public to have information about chemical accidents?

I don't think that we, as a country, can make progress until we have this kind of information. If you look at our current federal system of dealing with chemical accidents, there is no central database to help guide us toward better federal policy decisions. Until we have that, I think we are going to have overlapping jurisdictions, lots of uncertainty in the public's minds when an accident occurs, little idea of how to relate an accident to past experiences, and no way to ensure that it won't happen again in the future. ♦

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