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Groundbreaking Report Exposes Threat Unregulated Chemical Storage Tanks Pose to Virginia and the Nation

Federal and state governments vastly underestimate health and safety risks of unregulated aboveground tanks in Virginia, particularly to marginalized communities

Washington, DC — Federal and state government agencies are failing to protect millions of Americans — including Virginians — from spills, explosions, and releases from aboveground chemical storage tanks (ASTs). These unregulated tanks often store a large volume of toxic and flammable chemicals, and governments are vastly underestimating the threats they pose to public health and our environment, according to a [new report](#) published today by the Center for Progressive Reform.

These threats are swelling as our climate changes — spurring more intense storms, wildfires, and floods that can damage ASTs and trigger chemical spills and releases. Low-income communities and people of color are at greatest risk of harm because industrial facilities with chemical storage tanks are disproportionately concentrated in or near communities that have suffered from redlining, segregation, and other forms of institutional racism and classism.

The center’s new report explores the law and policy landscape relating to ASTs in Virginia as a window into their implications for the nation. It also presents new analyses estimating the number of aboveground chemical storage tanks in the Commonwealth, as well as the number of spills and their impact on health, safety, and disparities in the state. It also charts a path forward, with recommendations for long-overdue action by federal and state policymakers.

“Public officials have known about the dangers of unregulated aboveground chemical storage facilities for decades, but they continue to ignore the threat,” said David Flores, senior policy analyst at the Center for Progressive Reform and a lead author of the report. “We can no longer accept willful inaction when it comes to public health and safety. Virginia and federal policymakers must take action now to prevent chemical spills and explosions.”

Ranging in size from small pesticide totes to million-gallon storage tanks, ASTs expose people and the environment to toxic and flammable chemicals through leaks, releases, and improper handling. In the past, such incidents have resulted in worker deaths and have exposed fenceline communities to hazardous chemicals, causing lung problems, dizziness, headaches, nausea, and central nervous system problems. Despite these risks — and despite Congress’ 50-year-old

mandate to regulate these tanks — the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not regulate hazardous chemical storage tanks. Neither do some 40 states, including Virginia.

The center's new report — [*Tanks for Nothing: The Decades-Long Failure to Protect the Public from Hazardous Chemical Spills*](#) — is the first to assess the full scope of the threat posed by ASTs in Virginia. It estimates the extent of ASTs in Virginia and documents past spills; assesses threats to health, safety, and the environment; and explores possible remedies. It finds that:

- **Neither the federal government nor Virginia agencies have assessed the universe of aboveground chemical storage tanks.** Our analysis finds that there are likely between 2,720 and 5,405 aboveground chemical storage tanks in Virginia that should be subject to EPA spill prevention regulations.
- **The federal government vastly underestimates the number of harmful tank-related incidents.** From 2000 to 2020, there were 4,800 tank-related spills and incidents in Virginia, of which 1,400 explicitly involved ASTs. The seven most impacted cities and counties are home to a third of Virginians.
- **Climate change worsens the threat.** The number of AST-related incidents spiked between two- and eight-fold in the wake of hurricanes in Virginia, which are increasing in frequency and strength as our climate changes.

“The findings paint a troubling picture — particularly for people in fenceline communities,” said Jamie Brunkow, senior advocacy manager at the James River Association. “This report shows that AST incidents occur in nearly every county in Virginia, and that some parts of the state — such as Richmond, the Tidewater and Blue Ridge regions, and northern Virginia — face especially high risks.”

To address the problem, the report urges Virginia lawmakers to follow the lead of other states that have successfully regulated chemical storage tanks by enacting a comprehensive regulatory program that tracks ASTs, prevents spills, and makes information available to emergency planners and the public.

The report also calls on federal policymakers to issue comprehensive spill prevention and response rules for storage of hazardous substances, as the Clean Water Act first mandated five decades ago and encourage the public — and particularly affected communities — to participate and provide input.

“Change is possible,” said Darya Minovi, a policy analyst at the center and co-author of the report. “Ten states have taken action to protect people and the environment from hazardous chemicals in aboveground storage tanks, and Virginia and other states must follow their lead. For decades, the federal government has regulated tanks storing oil, gas, and waste — and it must do the same for those holding toxic and hazardous chemicals. Virginia and the Biden EPA must act now.”

To learn more about this report, visit <https://progressivereform.org/our-work/energy-environment/tanks-for-nothing-ast-rpt/>. You can also register for a related January 13 webinar at https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Qqs34gkZQAmXcuJXgBFa1Q.

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