

YOUR OPINION

‘We don’t have a choice in what air we breathe’

I don’t know why, but I continue to be amazed and amused at the repeated full-page color ads Midwest Sterilization continues to run in the Laredo Morning Times touting just how wonderful they are and how they meet local, State, and Federal regulatory standards.

To run a full-page color ad on the back page of one Sunday newspaper has to be expensive — multiplied by 2-4 times a month. While Midwest has sincerely done a great job of making donations to very worthy non-profit causes in Laredo, Midwest Sterilization is obviously wanting Laredo citizens to think that they are indeed great “corporate citizens” ... and while their donations to these very worthy causes are in fact extremely noble, Midwest Sterilization must do more.

I’m sure people won’t disagree that the service Midwest provides is indeed very necessary. However, it’s obvious that they continue to hide behind their influence over elected officials, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and most especially the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). Their influence over these agencies and politicians has created very lenient regulations ... what the pursuit of the almighty dollar can do ... and that’s exactly why they meet local, State, and Federal regulatory standards. If there’s nothing to hide, why won’t Midwest meet with the Clean Air Laredo Coalition, elected National, State and local leaders, as well as LISD, UISD, Laredo College, and TAMU officials ... has Midwest done something wrong without having the proof? The amount of emissions by Midwest’s facility of this toxic gas, Ethylene Oxide (EtO), is wrong and the proof is out there.

The EPA’s 2020 draft risk assessment found that inhaling EtO is known to cause cancers of the white blood cells (such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, myeloma, and lymphocytic leukemia), and may cause breast cancer. Children are thought to be more susceptible to EtO than adults; those who are exposed to EtO early in life are more likely to develop cancer later in life. Chronic exposure to EtO can also cause neurological symptoms, including memory loss and impaired hand-eye coordination.

As I mentioned in my January 19, 2022 “Letter to the Editor,” according to a Texas Tribune/ProPublica December 27, 2021 article, “the EPA concluded that ethylene oxide was 30 times more carcinogenic to people who continuously inhale it as adults and 50 times more carcinogenic to those who are exposed since birth than the agency previously thought.” The facility in Laredo, a ProPublica analysis determined, emitted “far more ethylene oxide than any other sterilizer plant in the country that reports emissions to the EPA.”

In a recent KGNS interview, Dr. Victor Treviño said that the first step in determining whether the emission levels are harmful to the public was the actual meeting itself held a week ago ... “He says this meeting was the first step in determining whether the

emissions levels are harmful to the public.” Really? That’s the first step? A meeting? Very disappointing. Let’s just say that we can agree to disagree. The data has been looked at and the conclusions are very clear.

Dr. Treviño, I do not believe that anyone is looking to eliminate Midwest’s facility in Laredo ... but relocating it miles beyond the Columbia Solidarity Bridge, for example, is a far better alternative. Instead of paying thousands of dollars in colorful full-page ads (sorry LMT), Midwest can provide mileage stipends to their employees or significantly increase their current rate of pay to make up for the distance they’ll have to travel.

Dr. Treviño, I also disagree when you said that this “isn’t a matter of whether the chemical is harmful but how it’s being mitigated and controlled.” ... the primary and overwhelming problem is that the chemical IS harmful and the only way to mitigate and control it is either not to use it or greatly minimize its use by only allowing its use outside of a 30-mile radius of the Laredo city limits. I believe that EtO related businesses have no place in populated areas, and I don’t understand why Midwest didn’t notify the community before they opened, or anytime thereafter, that the toxic gas they are emitting is in fact known to be toxic and consequently, very hazardous.

I understand that for almost 50% of medical devices, sterilization with EtO may be the only method that effectively sterilizes and does not damage the device during the sterilization process so therefore, surgeries are, in part, successful and lives are saved due to the EtO sterilization of said medical devices and equipment. I also understand that Midwest is very proud of the fact that they may only utilize < 1% of commercial EtO, but Midwest may actually be responsible for at least 30% of EtO emissions (source: EPA).

Alternatives to EtO will undoubtedly take investment and may increase prices which could potentially mean less profits. This industry’s increased influence by lobbyists over the TCEQ, EPA and possibly some elected officials can only mean, in my opinion, that honest and unbiased critical scientific research may continue to be delayed.

I’m reminded of what Spock said in one of the Star Trek movies, “Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” I would hate to think that the predominant mentality by TCEQ, EPA and some elected officials is that it’s OK for some of us to contract cancer as long as many more are helped and/or saved. I don’t understand why this can’t be a win/win for everyone.

Again, we don’t have a choice in what air to breathe. It’s time for sterilization facilities to find better alternatives to sterilizing medical devices and for the EPA and TCEQ to do its job and protect the health of the people of Laredo, the State of Texas, and the rest of the country.

David Trevino

“I do not believe that anyone is looking to eliminate Midwest’s facility in Laredo ... but relocating ... is a far better alternative.”



COMMENTARY

Democrats must hit back hard at GOP book bans

By Paul Waldman and Greg Sargent
THE WASHINGTON POST

Everyone knows Republicans are good at using congressional hearings to draw attention to the issues they want Americans (and especially their base) to think and talk about, whether GOP complaints are legitimate or not. When Democrats are in control, they don’t use their authority to quite the same effect.

But it’s something Democrats might consider doing more often, especially when important issues aren’t being sufficiently confronted at the national level, such as the disturbing wave of efforts to ban books from schools and libraries.

Which is why Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., is planning to hold a hearing on book banning in the House oversight subcommittee he chairs.

Ruby Bridges, the trailblazing civil rights icon, has agreed to testify at the hearing, Democrats tell us. Bridges could be a compelling witness, not just as a symbol of the desegregation of U.S. schools but also because a right-wing parents’ group seized on a Tennessee law limiting the teaching of race to mount an (unsuccessful) attempt to target a book about Bridges.

Other witnesses will include a parent who will testify about how her transgender daughter was aided by books about transgender issues, and a couple of students who led protests against a book ban in Pennsylvania and succeeded. A librarian who has fought efforts to ban books from school libraries will also testify.

Democrats involved with the hearing say they plan to make a public case that such a congressional airing is necessary to protect the First Amendment.

“The Supreme Court in Board of Education v. Pico held that it violates the First Amendment for government to remove books from school libraries because certain pressure groups disagree with the viewpoint,” Raskin told us in a statement, adding that his hearing will spotlight the “escalating threat to academic and intellectual freedom in America.”

Telling those vivid individual stories is also way to make the national trend real. And it absolutely is a trend.

Although the impulse to ban books is an old one, in the past year or so we’ve seen a flood of efforts at the state and local level to banish certain books from schools and libraries. These efforts are driven by the Republican belief that political hay can be made from allegedly dangerous ideas on race and sexuality that might be infecting the minds of children.

A new report from the American Library Association (ALA) found 729 challenges to library materials in 2021, the highest number in the 20 years the ALA has tracked the issue. Most targeted were books about various minority groups, the organization writes.

Yet, there’s little question that most Americans find this trend deeply troubling. Recent polls show overwhelming opposition to the idea of banning books, including after being presented with arguments for and against removing potentially controversial books from libraries.

Yet, Democrats have struggled to draw attention to these issues in a way that imposes a political cost on Republicans. Glenn Youngkin became the first Republican governor of Virginia in nearly a decade after running an ad lionizing a mother fighting against the teaching of Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” (the ad didn’t mention the book itself), even though his Democratic opponent, Terry McAuliffe, hammered him for it.

Since then, Democrats appear to have mostly ceded the field in the battle over such efforts, even as they’ve escalated. Democrats have not found a way to dramatize how such efforts harm real people, or to speak to the very large numbers of Americans who are surely dismayed by them. Underscoring the point, on the night of the hearing the activist group Book Ban Busters is holding a national read-in.

There’s clearly a void to be filled. Many of these banning efforts are happening in states controlled by Republicans, and those state legislatures won’t function as a clearing house for airing the national debate we need. In many places - Iowa, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas among them - the banning efforts originate in the state legislatures themselves.

Of course, there’s a risk that congressional Republicans will seek to turn the hearing into another circus. Republican staffers will no doubt scour the shelves for the most outrageous passages they can find, so their bosses can read them aloud, express shock and dismay - and get their canned outrage played in clips on Fox News.

But the majority of Americans who want their communities’ schools and libraries to include a variety of materials, even challenging and provocative ones, don’t really have anyone speaking to their values and aspirations. Indeed, this is the case even as Republicans speak very loudly to those on their side of these arguments.

Can a hearing like this show another way forward for Democrats? One has to hope so.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Laredo Morning Times does not publish anonymous letters. Letters must include the writer’s first and last names as well as a phone number to verify identity. The phone number is not published; it is used solely to verify identity and to clarify content, if necessary. When responding to another’s letter, writers should focus on the topic and not on the original writer themselves. No name-calling or gratuitous abuse is allowed. Letters are edited for style, grammar, length and civility. Also, letters longer than 1,000 words will not be accepted. Please send letters to editorial@lmtonline.com attached in a word document or in the email itself. If you cannot send an email, mail to Letters to the Editor, 111 Esperanza Drive, Laredo, TX 78041.

DOONESBURY - GARRY TRUDEAU

