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## Chemical Plants Could Be More Safe

This should, by all rights, be the year that Congress passes a tough chemical plant safety bill, protecting the public from one of the most serious terrorism vulnerabilities. There are already signs, however, that the chemical industry and its Republican allies may succeed yet again in blocking effective safety rules. The White House, which has remained in the background, needs to speak out, and Democratic leaders in Congress should work to make sure a strong bill is enacted without further delay.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, experts have warned that an attack on a chemical plant could produce hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries. Public safety and environmental advocates have fought for strong safety rules, but the chemical industry used its clout in Congress in 2006 to ensure that only a weak law was enacted.

That law sunsets this fall, and the moment is right to move forward. For the first time in years, there is a real advocate for chemical plant security in the White House. As a senator, President Obama co-sponsored a strong bill, and he raised the issue repeatedly in last year's campaign. Both chambers of Congress are controlled by Democrats who have been far more supportive than Republicans of tough safety rules.

A good bill is moving through the House. It would require the highest-risk chemical plants to switch to less dangerous chemicals only in limited circumstances, but Republicans have still been fighting it. In the House Homeland Security Committee, the Republicans recently succeeded in adding several weakening amendments, including one that could block implementation of safer-chemical rules if they cost jobs. Saving jobs is important, but not if it means putting large numbers of Americans at risk of a deadly attack.

The Obama administration needs to come out forcefully for a clean bill that contains strong safety rules without the Republican loopholes. Janet Napolitano, the secretary of homeland security, said last week that she considers chemical plants a major vulnerability and promised that the administration will be speaking out on the subject in the days ahead.

It is looking increasingly likely that Congress will extend the current inadequate law for another year to take more time to come up with an alternative. That would be regrettable. There is no excuse for continuing to expose the nation to attacks that could lead to mass casualties.