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PLATFORM

EPA Could Ease Up a Bit on Quake-Shocked Businesses

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A family-owned San Fernando Valley heat-treating firm that employs 30 people faces the prospect of coming up with \$100,000 over the next several months and as much as \$1 million over the next few years for ground-water cleanup. The quake will eliminate at least a month's worth of income for the firm. It needs a break from the EPA to survive.

A small manufacturer's plant was damaged, along with the homes of some of its 140 employees. The firm is under an order to spend \$500,000 immediately to upgrade the plant to satisfy the EPA's strict interpretation of a regulation that even the agency admits is confusing. Local sanitation officials say that sewage treatment won't be compromised if the upgrading is delayed, but the EPA has to agree and has been unwilling to exercise discretion.

Quake-damaged small businesses that have been directed by the EPA to clean up contaminated ground water need additional time to develop less costly options for doing the job. The financial burden of expensive new purification technologies will be the last straw for many firms, on top of damaged plants, employee absenteeism, disrupted work orders and lost revenue.

The IRS, not known for its flexibility, waived penalties for taxpayers who missed the January filing deadline and instructed them to write "L.A. Earthquake" on the top of their tax form. The Franchise Tax Board postponed the due date for sales-tax payments by a month. The Agriculture Department issued food stamps to quake victims on request. Even the giant Social Security bureaucracy mobilized to produce monthly checks a week early to ensure that earthquake victims received them on time.

The EPA sees itself as a cop, catching and penalizing polluters who deserve no

sympathy. But if the EPA doesn't take into account the scope of the disruption and damage caused by the earthquake, it is, in essence, punishing small businesses with "three strikes and you're out!" That approach may be justified for locking up habitual criminals, but for many small businesses, suffering the EPA's indifference on top of the recession and the quake will mean a third strike that knocks them out altogether.

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---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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