

Torstar staff photo

Doug Hietkamp, director of sustainable development programs at Teknion, goes through the company's plant, where product frames are being welded.

provincial programs "duplicating" each other, that's just not true, says McRobert. The national program requires facilities to report the release of toxins, while the provincial program encouraged companies to reformulate products and determine safer ways to produce them.

The interactive map was also unique to Ontario.

McRobert shares an example of an Ottawa woman experiencing health problems that she suspected were related to a nearby company. She searched on the TRA map for her community, learned what chemicals were being released, and saw that a solvent she was sensitive to was being used to clean products at a local computer company. Armed with that knowledge, she asked the ministry to investigate whether there was a reported spill or compliance issue, and was considering filing an application for investigation under Ontario's Environmental Bill of Rights, McRobert says.

McMaster PhD student Cathy Slavik and Professor Paul Demers believe the TRA could serve as a tool to inform workers of potential carcinogens in their workplace; data could help

predict work-related health problems before they arise.

"Every year, thousands of people die from cancer due to workplace exposures in Canada, many time the number of death due to workplace accidents," Demers says.

The pair were part of the first major study using TRA data to analyze trends in industrial carcinogens and its potential impact in the workplace. They noted areas where the number of industrial facilities reporting the use of toxic substances is highest - City of Toronto and Peel Region - as well as regions where the volume of toxic substance use is particularly high: Lambton County (chemical industry), Sudbury (nickel operations) and Niagara Region (steel industry).

While there are merits to both programs - a national toxic substance database and a provincial toxin reduction plan - some organizations say neither go far enough.

"It's just paper work," says Doug Hietkamp, director of sustainable development at Teknion.

Teknion is an award-winning office furniture design firm in Toronto

with facilities in Vaughan.

"The intent was right," he says of both programs. "It's like the governments had to have it in place, but it's designed not to disturb the status quo."

Hietkamp says sustainability is at the forefront of Teknion's business model; it follows international eco-certifications and avoids use or creation of pollutants found on international toxin lists.

"This is what drives us," Hietkamp said. "Our customers are demanding it."

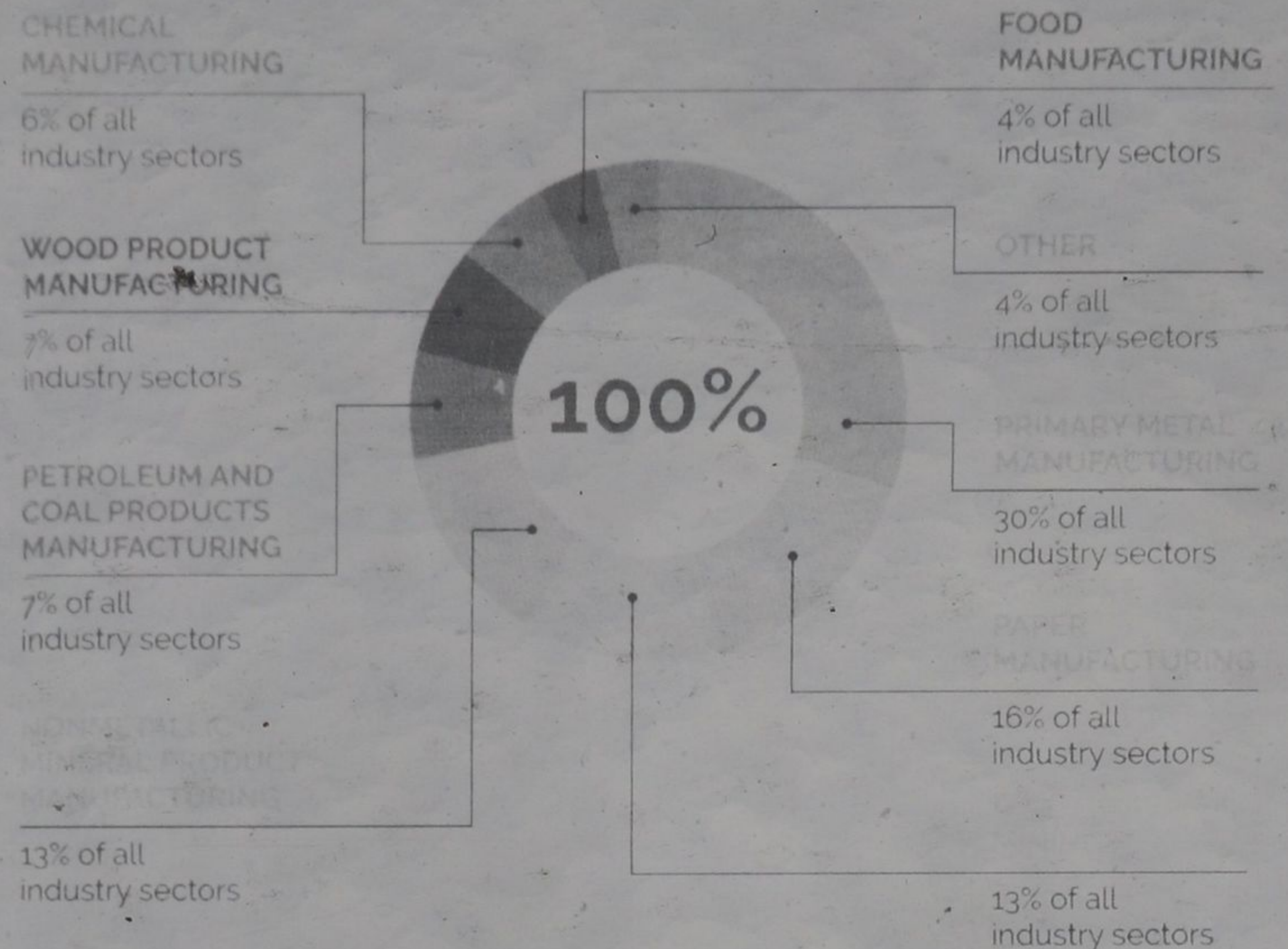
Slavik sees hope in this growing consumer demand for green products.

"There has been a general trend for reducing the use of toxins and moving toward greener technology," she says. "Right now, we are not in a period where we're seeing a lot of progress, but generally, we are hopeful."

Oudyk is not so optimistic.

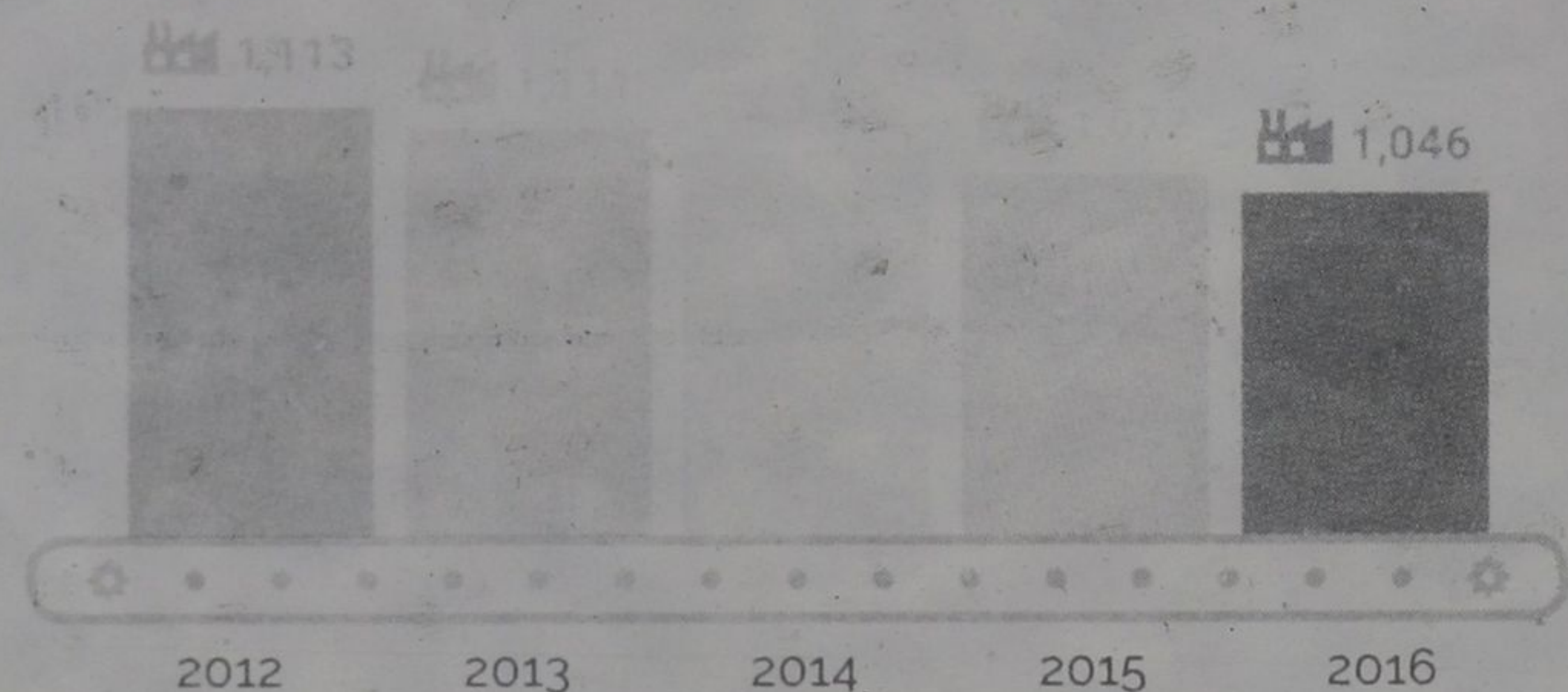
"I'm getting close to retirement and it seems we're fighting the same battles we fought back in the '70s and '80s," he says. "We've known for a long time the risks from chemicals and how to protect people, but the political will to force employers to stop their use just isn't there."

Industry sectors ranked by carcinogen emissions



Source: Compiled by the Occupational Cancer Research Centre, from NPRI reporting 2011 to 2015.

ONTARIO FACILITIES REPORTING TO THE TOXICS REDUCTION PLAN



TOTAL AMOUNT OF TOXIC SUBSTANCES USED, CREATED AND CONTAINED (TONNES) BY FACILITIES INTENDING TO REDUCE



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