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FROM: T. G. Grumbles
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SUBJ: BIODEGRADABLE PLASTIC

Attached is an article regarding a report that concludes that degradable plastics may hamper rather than help the solid waste crisis. The report was done by a broad based task force including industry, government and environmental group representatives.

This just illustrates that popular, good P. R. solutions may have technical difficulties that are overlooked in a rush to meet perceived environmental crises. This also further indicates the need for recycling efforts.

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Attachment

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BROAD-BASED PLASTICS TASK FORCE FINDS DEGRADABLES MAY WORSEN WASTE CRISIS

A broad-based task force of industry, government and environmental groups in a major consensus development has concluded that degradable plastics may hinder rather than help the nation's solid waste crisis. The development signals a significant shift away from the widely-held belief that degradable plastics are environmentally beneficial. Degradable plastics, which decompose over time, have been widely perceived as an answer to the landfill shortage. Because these materials gradually decompose and would eventually take up less space than nondegradables, they have been touted as a possible response to rapidly overflowing landfills. But recent studies have shown that byproducts of degradable plastics can migrate in landfills and cause groundwater contamination, causing more harm than good. A task force organized by the Council on Plastics & Packaging in the Environment, a plastics industry group -- including northeast state officials and environmentalists -- are using these findings to argue that rather than making plastics more degradable, the emphasis should be on source reduction and aggressive recycling.

In a Nov. 15 consensus statement released by the Council on Plastics & Packaging in the Environment, the task force -- which was created late this summer -- concludes that degradable plastics have "little positive role to play in municipal solid waste management." The group also faults current thinking on the subject -- which generally views degradability as environmentally desirable -- charging that it "is a deterrent to the implementation of real and lasting solid waste solutions." Instead, the group urges that recycling be emphasized, noting that technology for recycling post-consumer plastics packaging is in development. The task force says that a collection, processing and marketing infrastructure must be encouraged.

The conservation of raw materials and energy is a growing ethic, points out the task force. Because degradable plastics by definition require significant use of raw materials and encourage the use of more material, the group argues, it conflicts with the environmental ethic. The task force finds that the public is unaware "or misinformed" about the role of degradable plastics in solid waste management. The group says the negative aspects of degradability must be communicated to the public.

EPA sources were not surprised by the task force's statement. One agency source points out that although EPA is currently undertaking research on degradables, EPA has always been "wary" about degradability. Another source concurs and references an August 1989 statement by then-acting assistant administrator for Solid Waste & Emergency Response, Jonathan Cannon, which voices concerns about the environmental repercussions of degradability.

The broad-based consensus is of "tremendous significance," says an industry source, who points out that there were several different points of view within the task force, and it was "a surprise to get so many groups to agree." This source notes that the biggest concern and dilemma as far as the group was concerned seems to be the public's viewpoint -- explaining that educating the public on plastics degradability must become a priority.

Task force members include: Mobil Chemical Company; Campbell Soup Company; Clean Water Action Project; Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Resources; Vermont Dept. of Environmental Conservation; New York Dept. of Environmental Conservation; New Jersey Dept. of Environmental Protection; Connecticut Dept. of Environmental Protection; The Massachusetts Audubon Society; Procter & Gamble; Dow Plastics; The Dow Chemical Company; and Coca-Cola U.S.A.

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