Uncovering the dirt

"Midnight dumpers" are perhaps the worst but by no means the only source of dangerous chemical wastes spreading into the environment. Of mounting concern are chemicals which were "legally"—but sloppily—dumped, buried or placed in holding tanks years ago, before there were laws governing their disposal.

The best known example is the Hooker Chemical Company's dumping ground near Niagara Falls, N.Y. Although the company violated no laws—there *were* none dealing with chemical dumping before 1976—dangerous wastes were haphazardly buried, the land was ultimately sold and developed, and now, many years later, the wastes have resurfaced, forcing residents of the area to evacuate their homes.

Late this summer, as a part of its toxic substances program, Environmental Action began a new campaign to find out where the chemical wastes are—and what they consist of. On Aug. 25, EA lobbyist Blake Early called for citizens to take the initiative and ask the nation's chemical companies to reveal where they have dumped their chemical wastes over the past quarter century, so that steps could be taken to prevent further tragedies.

"We want to know," Early said, "where and when these chemicals have been dumped, what they consist of and how they've been contained. We want chemical companies to come forward to the public with the locations before the inevitable happens and more communities become victims of the horror that befell Niagara Falls."

Unfortunately, thus far no chemical company has voluntarily released information to the public. However, as Early predicted, the inevitable has already happened—the chemicals themselves are revealing where they are buried.

On Sept. 4, *The Washington Post* reported that investigators have found the cancer causing chemicals toluene, chlorobenzine and tetrachloroethelene leaching out of a southwestern Tennessee hillside which, it turned out, had been used as a dump by the Velsicol Chemical Co. between 1965 and 1972. (Velsicol is the same company that produced the now banned pesticides aldrin, dieldrin and leptophos.)

As a result of the disappointing response by the industry, on Oct. 1 EA began the second phase of the campaign. Each of 5,500 chemical companies has been sent a questionnaire aimed at pinpointing the location of chemical wastes that have been dumped in the past, and what those wastes consisted of. Under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, the Environmental Protection Agency is authorized to conduct a similar survey of current dumping practices, but no agency has responsibility for past activities—and it's past dumping procedures that have many authorities worried.

"Some people have told us to stay out of this, let the government handle it," said Early, "but that's exactly the point—no one wants to touch it, everyone keeps hoping it will go away. But as we've learned, when it comes to the environment, there is no 'away.'"

"The chemical companies have got to provide us with enough information so that authorities can find and deal with abandoned disposal sites that pose a grave threat to the environment and public health."

WHAT YOU CAN DO: If there are chemical companies in your town, community or neighborhood, urge their public affairs departments to answer the EA questionnaire. (If they've lost their copies, let us know and we will send others.) If they refuse to answer it, complain to the companies' presidents and your U.S. and state representatives. Write a letter to the local newspapers and TV stations. Make a fuss. You have a right to know about potential chemical dangers that could affect your health, your property, your children and your future.

PCB-ARCH-EXT0378499