

Environmental interests making a comeback in face of growing concern over toxic dumps

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The environment, one of the hot political issues of the 1970s, was overshadowed in the fierce competition for public attention as that decade ended. But it is making a comeback, becoming an important factor in political debates as homeowners become enraged about toxic dumps near their communities.

Knowledge, particularly great advances in testing, have uncovered dangerous chemicals in areas where they were thought not to exist. Much more has been learned about how these chemicals endanger health.

Actual danger to health, instead of aesthetic objections to a freeway

or an oil well, are at the heart of the revival of the environment as a political issue. Because of that, some observers in industry and government expect waste disposal, water purity and some of the other current environmental concerns to be a dominant domestic issue in next few years.

If that happens, the answers will be much more difficult, and expensive, than they were in the early 1970s, when the environmental movement emerged.

The interest actually began in the late 1960s and became intense in January, 1969, with the Santa

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Barbara, Calif., off-shore oil blowout. Television shots of the huge oil slick, and of men and women fighting to save birds and beaches, brought home the dangers of oil drilling, and the fragility of the coastline. Public opinion polls showed that the environment was a top concern of 1970 voters, cutting across party lines. That year, President Richard M. Nixon formed a Council on Environmental Quality and in April, 1970, the entire nation celebrated Earth Day, vowing to never litter again.

Concern on those years centered on preventing more Santa Barbaras; halting construction of freeways that destroyed sceneries and neighborhoods; stopping dam construction, and cleaning up polluted air and water. But, compared to what is known today, understanding of what constituted pollution was then minimal.

As often happens with widely popular issues, interest waned. The cycles of recession and inflation, the deficit, the decline of the America's industrial base, the competition with Japanese entrepreneurs and the growing influence of such single-issue political groups as right-to-lifers, dominated domestic politics.

But interest did not wane in the laboratories. More was learned about the impact of the chemicals needed for the manufacture of everything from automobiles to computer memory chips. Silicone Valley in Northern California, that prided itself on its pollution-free computer industry, found that

chemicals used in the industry were damaging the underground water supply.

Water is an example of the change.

Taste and freedom from disease carrying germs were the main worries of public and private water suppliers for years. Water in Southern California was considered pure, even though the water from the Colorado River supplied by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Water District, was heavy in mineral content.

But a decade or so ago, as more was learned about the new chemicals, the Environmental Protection Agency began more sophisticated testing, as did such state agencies as California's Water Quality Control Board. It was discovered, for example, that dirt, leaves and other organic matter falls into the water of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and makes its way to Southern California. There, it mixes with chlorine used by the Metropolitan Water District to purify its water and, scientists discovered, produced a cancer-causing chemical. To remedy that, chlorine was replaced by another purifier, chloramine. But that produced another side affect. The water was damaging to kidney patients on dialysis machines. Hospitals with dialysis had to put in special filters.

This all means that the environmental debate of the 1980s will be highly technical, as well as political, and will be much more difficult for the public, politicians and the press to deal with.