

FYI: M. Klaus
J. Weber
D. Wood
J. Ortiz
F. Provorny

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File PCB Incineration
ENSCO

Waste disposal terrifies Americans

From Newsday

SINCE THE revelation of illness and birth defects at Love Canal, Americans are terrified of hazardous industrial wastes. But they appear more terrified of proper disposal of those wastes.

While environmentalists are calling for sophisticated regional disposal facilities, community after community is blocking the proposals.

"Plants must be built. It's that or nothing," said Anne Sidbury of the National Wildlife Federation waste project.

"But as soon as the public hears of a plant locating, they raise holy hell. It's always the same: We don't want it in our backyard. They don't realize that the world is our backyard."

A prime example of the hazards of uncontrolled dumping versus the fear of regulated disposal is the controversy over the destruction of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that has raged for 14 months in El Dorado, Ark., a community whose major employers are Monsanto chemical, Phillips Petroleum and Lion Oil.

PCBs, used to insulate electronic components, have been found to cause illness, birth defects and death in laboratory animals.

Licences

About 150-million pounds (68,181,000 kilograms) are disposed into the environment; 290-million pounds (131,818,000 kilograms) are buried in leaky municipal landfills; 758 million pounds (334,545,000 kilograms) are in commercial use in power transformers, air conditioners, microwave ovens, TV sets and other products.

Since April 1978, federal law has required that liquid PCBs be destroyed by incineration. Solid PCBs will have to be burned after Jan. 1, 1980.

Three sophisticated waste disposal plants have sought burning licences. None has gotten the licence, in part because of the trouble in El Dorado.

When Energy Systems CO. (ENSCO), one of the United States' leading disposal firms, sought an incineration licence from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, El Dorado's 25,000 residents flew into a fury, terrified that PCBs might spill from tank trucks or railroad cars on their way to ENSCO.

ENSCO pointed out that residue ash from burning would contain less than 1 part per million of PCBs and would be buried in a secure disposal site, while the U.S. Food and Drug Administration permits 5 ppm in chickens and 10 ppm in milk and cheese sold for human consumption.

For two years ENSCO had safely incinerated herbicides that are vastly more toxic and difficult to burn than PCBs. But the county banned the transport of PCBs for disposal.

Sites rejected

After extensive legal wrangling, a judge recently cleared the way for a test burn on which the Arkansas licence will hinge.

In 1975, Minnesota had to return a \$3.7-million EPA grant to build a chemical waste landfill after the public rejected more than a dozen sites.

The state has no disposal facilities and cannot account for 57 percent of the 128,000 tons a year of hazardous waste generated within its borders.

Mark Norgaard, a planner with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, said: "You've got to get the people to agree there's a problem."

Twenty waste exchanges across the country are attempting to put waste producers and waste users together. Sixteen are information centres, while four buy and sell wastes.

An Oregon waste exchange, run under state contract by Resource Conservation Consultants of Portland, for example, puts a firm making electronic parts producing a silica sludge together with another firm that uses the sludge for reflective beads on roadside signs.

According to an Oregon waste exchange official, only about 10 per cent of the 80 by-products listed bimonthly are transferred. However most are not hazardous. A recent General Accounting Office report said only 3 per cent of all wastes have a potential for transfer and reuse.