PCB disposal wrong—it must go someplace

To the editor,

Upon returning from a visitation with a young man dying of cancer, I told my congregation that I am more determined to bring about the closing of the Earthline landfill in Wilsonville.

Immorality is not limited to sex, movies, or magazines, but extends to business activities which are harmful and endangers the lives of human beings.

Monsanto Chemicals in Sauget produces Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), a cancer source factor. Earthline Corp. buries PCB in the landfill in Wilsonville.

God gave us the good earth to produce food and beautify it with flowers and trees. As it is immoral to rape a woman, so it is immoral to rape the good earth with hazardous wastes, toxic materials and diseases.

To rape the earth with PCB so that this cancer disease can multiply, perpetuate and spread until it contaminates our farms, cattle, livestock, pollutes our streams, springs, creeks and well-water, is immoral because it endangers human lives with a death by cancer unbearable to face and endure.

The one who permits the rape of God's good earth is the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. They have knowledge that PCB can be destroyed within two seconds under 2,000 degrees farenheit, but do not insist on this process. Instead the EPA issues permits to bury PCB in the ground to perpetuate cancer.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency is to protect our environment, not destroy it. Instead of defending the people of Wilsonville who oppose the burial of PCB, the EPA goes on record to protect a private corporation, the Earthline landfill, to promulgate the growth and spread of this deadly cancer disease. Thus, the EPA is an agent to the destruction of the environment, an agent to contaminate our rich farms, an agent to pollute our streams, springs, creeks, water. Therefore, the EPA permits and approves the immoral activities of Monsanto and Earthline to rape our good earth daily."

People will continue to die the horrible death with cancer so long as we continue to allow Monsanto to produce it and Earthline to contaminate our earth and water with PCB.

Father Casimir F. Gierut
Bunker Hill

To the editor,

Several months ago my office was informed by a wire service reporter that the state of Iowa had discovered a shipment of waste oil reportedly contaminated with chlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Apparently the material was intended for use as road oil and thus, the Iowa Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) described the situation as a "near disaster". Subsequently Iowa DEQ announced their plans to move the material to a secure landfill in Sheffield, Illinois. Within hours we were besieged with phone calls from irate citizens, interested reporters and state representatives. Concurrent with the publicity one Iowa county ordered the material moved across the county line while another sought a court injunction to prevent movement of the oil across its border. Iowa Gov. Robert Ray authorized National Guard troops to stand guard over the tanks while Illinois Civil Defense units braced themselves for a highway shipment. Meanwhile the disposal facility, under considerable pressure, announced its intention to forego any attempts to accept the waste. In desperation, Iowa officials announced that they would ship the waste to a highly efficient incinerator in Canada. An Environment Canada spokesman later told me that the suggestion could not have come at a less opportune time. Local elections were about to be held and the proposal quickly became a campaign issue which ultimately forced the closure of one of the most efficient PCB destruct units in the world. But the final irony is that four days after the controversy began, Iowa officials disclosed that the oil, when tested, proved to be free of PCBs.

PCBs currently head the list of what we have come to term as "political contaminants". Others include Kepone, DDT, C-56, Phosvel etc. As such, the task of properly disposing of these materials is not so much a technical issue as it is a social phenomenon. This task is made all the more difficult by the misguided individuals and political hopefuls who, for whatever reasons, tend to confuse and frighten an interested public. The average citizen is generally unschooled in such disciplines as organic chemistry, toxicology, hydrogeology etc. and is easily influenced by scare tactics and false innuendo. It's high time that the media recognize this demagoguery for what it is.

Mailbag

The danger may truly lie not in intelligent management of hazardous materials but in the attack on the very methods designed to protect our society from the ever-growing menace of hazardous industrial waste.

To set the record straight, please note the following facts:

1. Although PCBs are often linked to cancer by popular belief, researchers have not recorded a single case of an individual developing cancer or dying as a result of exposure to PCBs. Historically, the most common affliction attributed to the substance is dermatitis as related to long term dermal exposure by workers. PCBs, like DDT, seem to pose a greater threat to certain fish and wildlife species than they do to man "per se". There are sound reasons for removing PCBs from the environment but they are not the reasons normally perceived by the general public.

2. PCBs are often described as highly toxic. Thus, many think of them as acute toxins on the order of cyanide or arsenic. But in reality, U.S. HEW's Toxic Substance list contains literally thousands of compounds, many of which are food additives, that are more acutely toxic than PCBs. Point in fact, all things are toxic through excessive exposure.

3. PCBs can be destroyed by incineration at very high temperatues. However, incineration is seldom 100 per cent efficient. The fraction that is not destroyed can volatilize and enter the atmosphere via the stack or become trapped in the scrubber sludge or incinerator ash.

4. At this writing there are only two incinerators in the United States equipped to burn PCBs and both are very selective relative to the wastes they will burn. Incineration of chlorinated organics results in the production of hydrochloric acid mist which tends to rapidly destroy an incinerators refractory.

5. Incineration is a partial solution but it is generally not suited for destruction of contaminated soils, certain sludges, capacitors, transformers, etc. Proposed federal regulations will also allow for controlled land disposal. This is in view of the fact that several independent research studies confirm that PCBs are highly immobile in soil.

6. Air, water and land are the only possible repositories for mankind's waste products. If society decides not to discharge its waste to the air or water then it must logically recognize the only remaining alternative.

7. PCBs have been used in hydraulic systems for several decades and residual concentrations can be found in some systems to this day. When drained, this fluid enters the waste oil market where, among other things, it is used as supplemental fuel and for oiling roads.

Without question, the majority of hazardous waste streams generated in the United States are disposed in some unknown fashion. Illinois, if not the leader, is among the leading states in the nation in controlling the disposal of industrial residuals. But even in this state, we can account for the safe disposal of no more than 15 per cent of the liquid waste, sludges and hazardous waste produced by industry. The remainder is surreptitiously dumped in back lots, farm fields, sanitary sewers, waterways and illegal landfills. Thus, if society will not tolerate legal and controlled disposal, it should be prepared to accept the uncontrolled disposal that now takes place under cover of darkness in everyone's back yard.

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