PCB New York

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Barrels of Chemicals Rot as Disposal Fails

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Special to The New York Times

OSWEGO, N.Y. — In a vacant lot just a mile east of downtown Oswego, thousands of barrels of chemicals are buckling and rotting, spilling into Wine Creek, a tributary of Lake Ontario.

This hazardous mess is all that is left of a failed attempt to solve at one stroke the toxic-waste problem of New York.

The 100-foot stack of the Pollution Abatement Services incinerator, its broken scrubber columns and the 7,500 barrels of chemicals bursting their seams as the weather warms are a monument to the failure of the State Department of Environmental Conservation's dream for industrialized western New York — a company that would cleanly burn much of the 1.2 million tons of hazardous waste generated each year in the state.

Shut Down 2 Years Ago

After six years of on-and-off operations that environmental officials called "totally mismanaged," the already-bankrupt-company's incinerator — the only one in the state then, or since, licensed to burn poisonous and nearly nonflammable chlorinated hydrocarbons — was finally ordered shut down in 1976 by the department for air-pollution violations, leaving 25,000 drums stacked up or buried in 12 different sites in Oswego County.

These barrels, which the company had collected in a rush to raise the cash to fix the incinerator, are leaching into streams and ground water, or creating fire hazards on some of the other sites where they are buried.

Oil used to fire the incinerator is

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The New York Times/Jim Trevor

Julian J. Pracnal Jr., who lives near Pollution Abatement Services disposal plant in Oswego, N.Y., walking amid broken and rotting chemical barrels.

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seeping to the surface from buried tanks at the incinerator site, and officials of the State and County Health Departments are worried that the broken drums are giving off vapors that may be both toxic and flammable.

Earlier this year, the Legislature appropriated $750,000 to dispose of the drums. On June 6, the department opened sealed bids for the job from three companies. The low bid was $2.23 million.

Officials say they will go ahead with the first $750,000 worth of work and hope to get the rest of the money appropriated later.

Pollution Abatement Services — founded in 1970 by two local engineers, an insurance broker and an lawyer, with a $500,000 bank loan, a $113,000 loan from the Small Business Administration and a city tax break on its property — is being sued for $1.8 million by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency for work it did on the site in 1976.

Two Dikes Built and Breached

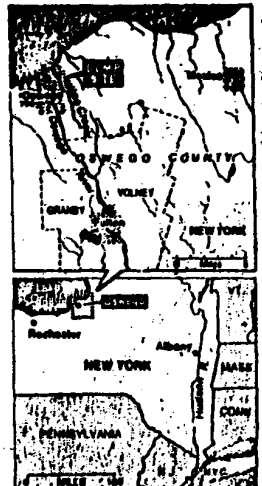
In an attempt to contain a million-gallon lagoon of water, oil and chemicals that was overflowing into Wine Creek, polluting marshlands behind a housing tract and fouling Lake Ontario, the environmental agency and the Coast Guard built two earthen dikes on the property. When those were breached, they drained the lagoon and ran it through the agency's Blue Magoo, a truck-mounted activated charcoal-and-sand filter, to purify it.

The Coast Guard became involved when oil reached Lake Ontario, a navigable waterway.

That lagoon was the source of many of the site's problems. It was intended to hold clean water for the scrubber, which blows a fine spray with dissolved lime in it into the incinerator's smokestack to neutralize and wash particles out of the smoke for retreatment.

But chemical tank trucks were apparently allowed to dump their loads into the lagoon, fouling the scrubber.

The contaminated water caused such a foul odor in the incinerator that the Oswego police switchboard was inundated with complaints, and the lagoon, which overtopped in rainy weather, polluted a marsh that ran past 25 homes downstream on Wine Creek. At different times, the police and the Coast Guard both posted officers at Pollution Abatement's gate to turn away trucks, but the company won court injunctions against them and continued to take in barrels and tankers.



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"It was incredible," said Charles Goddard, head of solid waste for the Department of Environmental Conservation. "They had oil in there. They had PCB's. They had whey — you know, curds and whey. Sour milk."

"They had cylinders of compressed gas," said Neil M. Gingold, the department's regional attorney. "The E.P.A. had to call Army demolition experts to get the cans out."

Company owners admitted that some wastes had been mismanaged.

"We dumped the dairy whey in the scrubber lagoon, thinking it would evaporate, which was a mistake," said Jack B. Miller, executive vice president. "The oil got there when we pumped overflowing sewer lagoons into the scrubber one. It wasn't such a problem because it floated, and the intake pipes for the scrubber were underwater."

The cylinders, which fell in by accident, would probably not have exploded, Mr. Miller contended, since they contained compressed hydrochloric gas. If they had leaked, the gas would have turned into hydrochloride acid in the water and been neutralized by lime treatment.

The owners also said the company was undercapitalized and was founded before the state passed regulations in 1977 that forced companies to incinerate their wastes or store it in safe, watertight landfills.

"The average price we got for incineration was 3.5 cents a gallon," said H. Willard Pierce, the company's president. "We'd predicated the business on getting 10.7 cents, and the first year we got 4.7. You just couldn't make them pay what you needed when they could dump it on the ground and get away with it. Since the Love Canal, I see that companies are getting 30 or 60 cents a gallon." (Chemical wastes leaking from the Love Canal dump site in Niagara Falls, N.Y., forced the removal of 238 families last year.)

According to environmental officials, some waste disposers got as much as $50 to $100 a drum, depending on the contents.

The company had also bought its scrubber from a Dutch company, which went bankrupt before the guarantee on it was up, complicating repair problems.

The failure of the company was particularly galling for the Environmental Conservation Department because it had encouraged its creation and had, according to Mr. Gingold, "bent over backwards in the beginning to be lenient on the air regulations."

Some Fought It From Beginning

Some neighbors and one city councilwoman, however, fought the incinerator nearly from its inception, however.

"That creek was like a kiss from a strange blonde for those guys — I mean it was like a blessing they didn't expect," said Julian J. Prucnal Jr., who lives downstream from the site. "When they got too full up, they could discharge right into it."

Mr. Prucnal continued: "One night they had flames shooting 20 feet out of the stack and a cloud of blue smoke was settling on us. I woke up, and my two sons were choking. I jumped in my car and went up there, and if I'd had a gun, I would have killed them. They saw me and went right for the valves to shut it down — they knew they weren't supposed to be burning like that.

"I'm a building and grounds supervisor at the Fitzpatrick Nuclear Plant. I have to send guys to school just to spray a little herbicide around. When I think of what I have to go through for the environment there, it makes that place look like nothing."

Miscellaneous monuments have been erected — the Tower of Pisa, for example, or the West Side Highway. Drums full of plastic resins have split open and exploded the ground with white needle and look like an acre of hothouse peanuts. Some open barrels with the label "SLOP" stenciled on them hold pools resembling raspberry jam streaked with gray paint.

Others have spider-web cracks in patinas of black granular chemical waste, and those that have split open have veils of transparent resins hanging across the gaps like huge mouths trying to blow bubble gum.

The contents of the drums have not been fully analyzed yet. ECA Services of Lewiston, N.Y., analyzed a sampling of them for the Environmental Conservation Department and found them to be mostly nonchlorinated solvents, acids, organic solids and bad batches of paints and plastics. The report said no pesticides or carcinogens had been found.

However, memos by the county and the State Health Department have called that report "so vague as to be useless," and high concentrations of PCB's have been found in the soil at one site in the town of Granby used by the company to dump drums.

Site Called a Fire Hazard

The Health Department memos also call the site a fire hazard, and said the vapors given off by the barrels might be flammable and dangerous to cleanup workers.

A recent visitor found that oil was still seeping from buried tanks and running under booms of absorbent materials placed in the stream. He also met a worried Oswego fire marshal looking the area over to formulate an evacuation and firefighting plan if the chemicals began to burn, giving off dangerous gases.

Thousands of drums taken in by the company were stored in other sites around the county. An abandoned milk plant in the town of Meadoe holds 7,500. A city landfill in Volney has either 1,200 or 6,200 buried in it, depending on whether the state or the company is speaking. The ownership of drums at nine other sites is contested by the two.

"The bank hasn't foreclosed on our property," Mr. Miller said. "They're smart." (They would own the drums).

"This operation was well-intended," he added. "We went to regulatory agencies for help many times. There was no help available. There were only regulations."

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