Idaho snubs PCB waste of 2 states

By LONNIE ROSENWALD 6/9/79
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A dusty, long-abandoned missile site in southwestern Idaho has gained a widespread reputation as one of the country's top dumping grounds for PCBs, a deadly chemical that must be buried in federally approved chemical dumps.

But when Kansas environmental officials wanted to bring 113 PCB-contaminated cows to the Wes-Con waste disposal site near Grand View 2 weeks ago, shoot them in the desert and bury them in the site's underground missile silos, Idaho said no.

The refusal came a month after Idaho officials turned down a similar disposal request from Michigan, where the frozen carcasses of 30,000 PBB contaminated cows have been awaiting burial for several years. At the same time, smaller PCB shipments continue to be poured into the giant, concrete-sealed chutes.

Gov. John Evans balked at the cattle shipments because he felt they would "create ill feeling" among Idahoans, according to press secretary Don Watkins.

But, Watkins said there would "probably be no problem with a shipment announced Monday of 17 barrels of PCB-filled waste to Wes-Con from Colorado.

Watkins said the state has no legal control over the privately owned facility, but Wes-Con owner Gene Rinebold agreed to turn down the disposal deals, which could have earned him more than $350,000.

"The public relations would have been horrible," Rinebold said Monday.

Wes Con is one of 3 Western facilities where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency allows permanent disposal of PCBs, DDT and other toxic chemicals. Waste experts consider the site geologically and climatically ideal for long-term waste storage.

Idaho farmers discard pesticides at the site, which has also received military and industrial chemical shipments from as far as New Jersey. Included in the shipments are hundreds of tons of PCB-contaminated materials each year, according to Rinebold.

Still, Idaho officials say the waste site is not intended to serve as a repository for the contaminated cows -- or the political problems -- of other states.

"Wes-Con is of value to the people of the state so they can dispose of material generated or used in the state," noted Idaho Environmental Division Director Lee Stokes, who argued against both shipments.

The Michigan cows were contaminated in 1973 with PBBs, a cancer-causing chemical similar to PCBs, which was unintentionally mixed into cattle feed. Thousands of cattle were killed and Michigan health officials estimated the substance was ingested by every resident of the state.

Stokes said the cattle contamination levels were

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PCBs

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within federal guidelines, but above strict standards set by the state Legislature.

For the past 6 years, he said, Michigan residents have blocked burial efforts in their state.

"If Michigan could solve its own political problems, they could bury it anywhere in Michigan," said Stokes.

The Kansas cows, which would have been shipped live to Wes-Con, posed a different problem for Idaho officials and Wes-Con. Environmental officials there refused Stokes' request that the cattle, whose coats a farmer mistakenly rubbed with PCB-filled oil, be slaughtered before being shipped to Idaho for burial.

The specter of a concentration camp-like cattle slaughter on the Grand View desert deterred Rinebold, who said he "could see the pictures on the front page, of cattle standing out there being shot."

Stokes said Kansas "didn't want to spend the money" to kill and package the highly contaminated cattle.

Safety was not a factor in the decision, state officials said. The silos are state and federally regulated and have 6-foot-thick concrete walls and 13-foot concrete floors.

Evans' action parallels former Gov. Cecil Andrus' veto in 1976 of a shipment of 5,000 pounds of the deadly insecticide, Kepone, from a Baltimore chemical plant. In that incident Rinebold also agreed to reject the controversial shipment.

Rinebold, who started operating the storage facility in 1976 after it was abandoned by the military, admits the site has gained a reputation as a popular dump site for the nation's growing share of hazardous wastes, or those which the EPA won't allow in normal landfills.

"We probably are the best place to take it, because of the soil structure and geology," he said.

Still, many Idahoans have objected to having the state become the "dumping ground of the nation," a label Evans and other officials have often used to describe the state's active chemical waste disposal activities, as well as nuclear waste disposal at the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory at Arco.

"We have to look at the national interest too, to a degree," admitted Stokes. "But how much of that should go on is arguable."

According to an Associated Press reporter in Wichita, the 113 Kansas cows have since found a final resting place. On Sept. 20 the cattle were buried in a chemical disposal site near Wichita.

But Watkins said as far as he knows, Michigan officials are "still groping" for a dumping place.

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