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Public cry: no dump here

By NEIL S. ROSENFELD
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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.

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. About 150-million pounds are dispersed into the environment; 290-million pounds are buried in leaky municipal landfills; 758-million pounds 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 licenses. None has gotten the license, in part because of the trouble in El Dorado.

When Energy Systems Co. (ENSCO), one of the nation's leading disposal firms, sought an incineration license 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. After extensive legal wrangling, a judge recently cleared the way for a test burn on which the Arkansas license will hinge.

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