

A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

The tide of environmental action -- and criticism -- is on the rise. We at SPI headquarters have only to look at our daily mail and monitor the communications media to see how the groundswell of concern has spread across the country. Environmentalism is a grass roots movement today, and it is here to stay.

And the environmentalists and concerned citizens are right. They should be upset. Not only solid waste pollution, but pollution of the air and water are pressing national problems that we Americans have conveniently managed to ignore for the past century. Environmental pollution won't go away, and it will make life intolerable unless something is done about it.

Environmentalists and their supporters in government and the public are right when they say the problems are critical, but I believe they have made serious mistakes in ordering their priorities. In fact, I believe that these mistaken priorities may well destroy the effectiveness of the movement for environmental improvement.

Just to consider the problem with which the plastics industry is most concerned -- solid waste disposal -- I am disturbed by the emphasis on materials as opposed to disposal. We at SPI have shown time and again, and will continue to show, that all materials can be readily disposed of -- without environmental problems -- within the capabilities of currently available technology.

When environmentalists or legislators point the finger at a particular package or packaging material and say "get rid of this offender to help clean up the environment," they are indulging in dangerous tokenism. They are putting a Band-Aid on the problem -- not solving it.

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In the area of solid waste management, we need to focus our attention on the central problem -- disposing of the total refuse load. This approach calls for five specific and positive courses of action:

1. Enact and enforce strong anti-litter laws, accompanied by extensive educational program.
2. Modernize municipal refuse collection systems.
3. Upgrade municipal incinerators to the level of currently available incinerator technology. Such incinerators would dispose of any materials in our refuse without environmental pollution.
4. Eliminate all open refuse burning and open dumping and ensure that all landfill sites are engineered and managed in a proper and sanitary manner.
5. Encourage research and development in the areas of refuse separation, reuse and recycling by government and private industry. In the long run, our national goal must be to reclaim and recycle as much of our fast-depleting natural resources as possible.

These programs are directed toward solving the real problem -- waste disposal today, separation and recycling tomorrow. These programs are where environmental priorities should be directed.

The grave danger in the piecemeal approach, which characterizes so much of today's environmental action, it seems to me, is that the public may be lulled into a false sense of accomplishment. The implication is that by eliminating a particular material or type of package, we can do something meaningful about solid waste pollution. This is just not so. All materials and all packages must eventually be disposed of; environmental priority must be given to total waste management systems.

Ralph L. Harding, Jr.
Executive Vice President
SPI

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SPI SPOKESMEN TESTIFY AGAINST NYC PACKAGING PROPOSALS

"The costs of disposing of municipal refuse should be evenly shared by all materials contributing to it, and packaging materials should not be singled out to bear an unreasonably heavy share of these costs." This point was made by Eugene E. Winne, vice president and general manager of the Ruco Division of Hooker Chemical Corp. and chairman of SPI's Environment Policy Committee, during testimony at public hearings conducted by New York City's Environmental Protection Administration on two proposed antipackaging bills.

Ralph L. Harding, Jr., executive vice president of SPI, joined Mr. Winne in testifying against the proposals.

One bill proposed a deposit/redemption plan covering all containers sold in the city; the other would impose a graduated tax on all packaging materials, with plastics taxed at the highest rate.

Commenting on the tax bill, the SPI spokesmen said: "The cost of disposal must be included by society in general in the total cost of each product. These costs must be evenly shared by everyone who contributes to the whole disposal load, not just packaging." In SPI's view, the proposed tax bill is not nearly as inclusive as it ought to be.

SPI also requested that plastic containers be exempted from the deposit/bounty bill, which would require a two cent deposit on all containers, with a four cent bounty to be paid upon their return to designated redemption centers. Mr. Winne pointed out that the plastics industry has taken no part in the movement toward redemption centers which, he suggested, may actually hamper the achievement of a genuine solution to the total refuse problem.

"At this point in time," Mr. Winne said, "we do not have the techniques fully perfected to recycle or reuse plastics from municipal refuse. Thus, if we were forced to set up redemption centers and take back all of our containers, we would have to turn them over to the Sanitation Department for disposal. Currently, there is no economic value for used plastics containers. In fact, since the average plastics container costs less than the two cent deposit, let alone the four cent bounty, this proposed measure could literally eliminate plastics containers from the New York scene."

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Following the SPI testimony, Jerome Kretchmer, New York City Environmental Protection Administrator, asserted that he did not believe the facts cited by SPI to prove the minor impact of plastics packaging on environmental pollution. He made it clear that he regards plastics as a major problem in New York (although, as Mr. Harding pointed out, he is currently promoting the use of plastic garbage bags in the city).

SPI has followed up this initial hearing with meetings with Mr. Kretchmer's staff in an effort to clarify their understanding of the role of plastics in solid waste management. The tax bill proposed by Mr. Kretchmer is being revised and is soon to be placed before the New York City Council. Thomas J. McGrath, staff administrator of the Environment Policy Committee, has testified before that body.

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ECO-TIPS #2 CONTINUES TO ATTACK PVC

Concern, Inc., a leading Washington-based environmental action group, has published the second edition of their Eco-Tips bulletin. This widely distributed leaflet urges consumers to ask local store managers to stock "environmentally sound" products -- specifically recommending glass bottles instead of PVC containers.

While the reference to plastics in this bulletin is brief, the mailing also contains a progress report from Concern of which nearly one-half is devoted to PVC, including the allegation that "when large quantities of PVC are burned, hydrogen chloride gas is emitted capable of causing damage to nearby buildings and shrubs."

Their statement also says: "The (plastics) industry claims that PVC containers are such a small percentage of total wastes that the problem is not a serious one. Concern, Inc., believes that unless the use of PVC containers is discouraged now, the problem could become extremely serious in the future."

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Concern, Inc. distributed 400,000 copies of the first issue of Eco-Tips, which also contained statements critical of plastics. In the short time since the publication of the second edition, SPI headquarters has received over 150 letters from individuals protesting the use of PVC packaging. SPI has responded by sending them detailed information on plastics and the environment and on PVC as a packaging material. It is likely that packagers, processors and resin suppliers will also be hearing from people who have read the Concern bulletin. SPI headquarters can assist in answering these questions.

NEW ENVIRONMENTAL FACT BOOK ON PLASTICS

"Plastics In Solid Waste," a special sub-council report of the National Industrial Pollution Control Council was published in late March under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The "NIPCC Report," a comprehensive fact book on plastics and the environment, was prepared for the Secretary of Commerce as part of a continuing study of all aspects of pollution from industrial sources. SPI staff assisted in the preparation and editing of the text, which contains the latest information on the environmental characteristics of plastics.

"Plastics In Solid Waste" is an important document for the plastics industry; it can be used by all SPI members as background information to aid in answering questions and in responding to inaccurate environmental criticism. This booklet, which supplements and updates the SPI position paper, "The Plastics Industry and Solid Waste Management," will be sent to all SPI members. SPI will also supply additional copies (minimum order: 10 copies for \$2.00).

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"NATIONAL CENTER" APPOINTS FIRST HEAD

The National Center for Solid Waste Disposal has named as its first president Dr. Richard L. Lesher, a former assistant administrator of NASA.

The National Center was formed last year in Washington, D.C. (see *Plastics and the Environment*, March 8) by leading manufacturers, retailers and users of packaging materials to coordinate industry's efforts to find solutions to the problems of solid waste management. Twelve trade associations, including SPI, will be asked to join in supporting the Center's activities.

In announcing Dr. Lesher's appointment, Donald M. Kendall, chairman of the Center and president of PepsiCo, said: "The selection of the first president of the Center is a major step toward industry's goal to deal with the difficult and costly environmental problem of solid waste disposal through a total systems development approach."

During his five years with NASA, Dr. Lesher was responsible for the agency's management information systems, scientific and technical information program and technology utilization program.

MARYLAND "BIODEGRADABLE" PACKAGING BILL OPPOSED

Robert J. Barrett, manager, Environmental Protection Group, Plastics Division, Mobil Chemical Co., and vice chairman of SPI's newly formed Foam Tray and Carton Division, testified on March 11 before the Maryland House of Delegates as a representative of SPI. He spoke in opposition to Maryland House Bill 642, which calls for a ban after January 1, 1975 on all containers sold in the state which are not made of glass or metal -- unless they are completely biodegradable. In his testimony, Mr. Barrett attacked the popular myth of the desirability of biodegradation and asked the delegates to turn their attention to improving current waste disposal techniques. Partly as a result of his appearance, it appears that this bill is no longer under active consideration.

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BRIEF NOTES

.... "The Plastics Industry Looks at Environmental Pollution" is the title of a standard speech prepared by SPI staff for use by plastics industry spokesmen. Intended for use before general audiences, the 25-minute talk discusses the entire solid waste disposal problem in laymen's language and sets plastics disposal in proper perspective

The speech can be used as is or as a guide for appearances before civic and environmental groups at the local level. Copies have been distributed by SPI headquarters to all SPI voting representatives. Additional copies may be obtained on request.

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.... The following letter appeared in the March issue of Glamour magazine. We reprint it here without comment.

I don't think you had the average busy, often harassed young mother in mind when listing the (environmental) "do and don'ts" that anyone ought to be able to live with. Some that are impractical for me and why: "returning deposit bottles" -- I have to take two young children with me when I walk four blocks to the supermarket: "using glass rather than plastic containers" -- which is worse, the "pollution potential of polyvinyl chloride containers" or children breaking and cutting themselves on glass? "using cloth diapers, napkins; china cups and glasses instead of paper and plastic whenever it's not too impossible" -- it's always "too impossible" for a mother who doesn't want to waste her precious free time doing washing and ironing that isn't essential.

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....The 1971 Pollution Engineering & Equipment Exposition and Conference will be held in Chicago at the Conrad Hilton Hotel on June 22, 23 and 24. Topics to be discussed at the conference are: Industry's Toughest Pollution Problems; The Legal Road to a Better Environment; and Industry/Municipal Cooperation. Chemical Engineering magazine, the Conference sponsor, has drawn speakers from industry, government and the universities. For further information, write: Laurence White, Editor, Environmental Engineering Deskbook, Chemical Engineering, 330 West 42nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036.

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