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Toxic waste plan is left to Congress

BY OWEN ULLMAN

WASHINGTON (AP) — A panel of experts has raised the specter of millions of tons of toxic waste accumulating with no place to bury it because local residents don't want disposal sites in their backyards.

As a result, Congress must decide whether federal and state officials should be empowered to override local decisions banning toxic waste disposal sites, one panelist, a government lawyer, suggested Tuesday.

"It is a tension between federal and state governments wanting safe, well-managed sites and local governments not wanting them in their backyards," said Merideth Wright, an attorney with the Environmental Protection Agency. "Congress has not yet addressed that question."

She and five other panelists representing government and the solid waste industry discussed the problems at the Sixth National Congress on Waste Management meeting here this week.

AS A CASE example, the panel focused on a dispute, now in the courts, involving a toxic waste site in Wilsonville, Ill., about 35 miles north of St. Louis.

That former coal mining town of 700 has sued the Earthline Corp., a subsidiary of SCA Services of Boston, in an effort to stop further burial of toxic wastes at Earthline's 138-acre site.

One of the chemicals buried there is PCP, polychlorinated byphenyl, a chemical some researchers say causes cancer in laboratory animals.

Wilsonville residents claim the landfill site imperils their health because of potential leaks that could contaminate their water and air.

The case currently is pending in an Illinois county circuit court, where a decision is not expected until next year.

THE PANELISTS agreed there is a severe shortage of safe sites to bury toxic wastes, which the EPA estimates are accumulating at a rate of 34 million metric tons a year. But efforts to develop new ones often are stymied, as in the Wilsonville case, because of what one industry representative termed "violent, hysterical reaction from the public."

"We are in need not only of improved technology but of psychology," said Donald Day, an Ohio EPA official who suggested more effort be directed at allaying public fears. "We need to tell people how dangerous this (waste) is and how safe our (disposal) facility is."

Steven Siegel, an SCA official representing Earthline, defended the Wilsonville site, calling it "ideal according to all the evidence."

"This is a test case," he said. "If Wilsonville is not accepted, our belief is there won't be any more sites in the country." He added that as long as it is legal to manufacture toxic chemicals, federal and state governments "need some guts" to plan for waste disposal.

However, Mirko Popovich, a retired school teacher who attended the session as Wilsonville's official representative, said his townspeople were responding neither hysterically, violently nor without reason.

Polovich denied that the site is "ideal," saying Earthline's site was developed on the basis of "general abstract" rather than fact.

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