

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#75 - Announcing New Weekly Source Of Information For Waste Activists

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The grass roots environmental movement has just gained an excellent new source of information on incinerators, landfills, and recycling: WASTE NOT, a weekly publication of Work on Waste USA, Inc., edited by Ellen and Paul Connett.

Waste Not discusses technical issues in language anyone can understand. It also announces new reports as they appear. For example, people concerned about incinerator ash and landfill problems will want to know about the following: "THE HAZARDS OF MUNICIPAL INCINERATOR ASH AND FUNDAMENTAL OBJECTIVES OF ASH MANAGEMENT" available from Dr. Richard Denison, Environmental Defense Fund, 1616 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 387-3500. And: "INCINERATOR ASH ALERT" from New York Public Interest Research Group, 9 Murray Street, NY, NY 10007; phone (212) 349-6460. And: "GREENPEACE REPORT ON THE DIOXIN LEVELS IN THE SOIL OF THE COMMUNITY NEAR PHILADELPHIA'S N.W. INCINERATOR AND IN THE INCINERATOR ASH." Available from Ben Gordon, 1017 West Jackson, Chicago, IL 60667; phone (312) 666-3305.

Because Paul Connett is a chemistry professor, WASTE NOT gives insight into solid waste that you cannot find anywhere else. For example, WASTE NOT #3 gives information about the chemistry of landfill ash-- information that can help citizens see through false arguments by the federal EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). The ash issue is crucial to the future of incinerators.

Today Americans produce about 160 million tons of MSW each year. About 15 million tons of this (9%) are currently incinerated in about 140 incinerators and these incinerators produce about 4 million tons of ash annually. By the year 2000, Americans will be producing 190 million tons of MSW, available landfill space will have diminished (because old landfills are filling up, and new ones can't be sited because the public now knows that landfills leak and pollute drinking water), the cost of landfilling municipal solid waste (MSW) will have increased greatly--and so, according to EPA, several hundred new MSW incinerators will be needed. Incinerators reduce the volume of garbage that has to be dumped.

Unfortunately, there is considerable evidence that MSW ash is more toxic than the garbage from which it was derived. Incinerators reduce the volume, but they increase the hazards. Heating garbage in an incinerator does two things to increase the hazards: it concentrates the toxic metals, and it produces new chemicals that weren't in the garbage to begin with (or were there, but in smaller amounts). Dioxins and furans are examples of chemicals created inside an incinerator.

In the late 1970s, the EPA developed a test for deciding whether a particular waste is toxic or not. It is called the "Extraction Procedure Toxicity Test" or "EP Tox Test" for short. The test is simple: slightly acid water (intended to simulate natural rain water) is poured onto the waste; water that trickles through the waste (called leachate) is tested to see what it contains. If it contains any chemicals covered by the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA, a federal law) in amounts 100 times higher than the permissible drinking levels established in the SDWA law, then that waste is declared officially toxic and must be disposed of in a hazardous waste landfill, not an ordinary landfill. Disposal in a hazardous waste landfill is very expensive.

For years, people have been dumping MSW ash into ordinary landfills without doing the EP tox test. However during the last two years, the Environmental Defense Fund and others have gathered evidence that about 30% of all MSW ash cannot pass an EP tox test. This means that about 1/3 of all MSW ash should be disposed of in hazardous waste landfills at great expense. If MSW ash has to be disposed of as a hazardous waste, the economics of municipal incineration cease to make sense. Since banks and waste companies like Waste Management, Inc., have billions of dollars at stake in the move toward MSW incinerators, the toxicity of MSW ash is a

tremendously important political issue.

The EPA is in a bind. Their job is to protect the natural environment, yet EPA is an executive agency run by political appointees. Clearly, it is in the interests of politicians everywhere to push ahead with solid waste incinerators. The companies that get the huge contracts to build and operate such incinerators will make campaign contributions and cooperate with local officials in other important ways.

Furthermore, if incinerating MSW becomes too expensive, and if landfill space runs out because people won't allow siting of new landfills in their backyard for fear of being poisoned, then there will be no choice left: we will have to begin to look at the individual items in municipal garbage and stop manufacturers from using the most toxic chemicals. Such meddling in industrial decision-making is the last thing this government wants to start.

For these reasons, the EPA needs MSW ash to appear to be non-toxic so that the economics of municipal incineration will continue to be accepted by taxpayers.

Thus EPA administrator Lee Thomas, President Reagan's man at EPA, needs to have us believe that the EP tox test makes MSW ash look worse than it really is. Mr. Thomas testified before Congress April 13 that the EP tox test "may overestimate the amount of metals" that would actually leach out of MSW ash under real landfill conditions. Mr. Thomas argues that the EP tox test simulates acid conditions in a garbage landfill, but that ash in a landfill all by itself, not mixed with garbage, would not be in an acid environment and therefore would not release metals as much as the EP tox test indicates.

In WASTE NOT #3, Paul and Ellen Connett give evidence that reveals the fraudulent nature of the EPA's argument. They cite two studies showing that MSW ash is so alkaline (from the limestone added to the pollution scrubbing system) that normal water leaches out more metals than does acid water. In other words, the Connetts give chemical evidence that the EPA's EP tox test doesn't overestimate the hazards of MSW ash, it underestimates those hazards.

When the EPA sets out to prove a point for political purposes, science takes a back seat. Without people on our side who know chemistry, where would we be? Misled by our government but unable to understand how. Hats off to Paul and Ellen Connett and their new publication, WASTE NOT. Subscribe! It's \$25/yr from Work on Waste USA, 82 Judson St., Canton, NY 13617; phone (315) 379-9200. (If you can, send an extra \$50-- help them expand.)

--Peter Montague

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