

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#72 - Waste Management Gains Pipeline To Grass Roots Movement's Plans

April 10, 1988

Waste Management, Inc.--the nation's largest waste hauler and the company fined most for breaking environmental laws--has successfully developed an information pipeline into the grass roots environmental movement. A combination of cunning and dumb luck has given the nation's least lawabiding waste hauler an inside track to plans and strategies of citizen groups across the country.

In 1987 the National Wildlife Federation, one of the nation's largest environmental organizations, elected Dean L. Buntrock to its Board of Directors. Mr. Buntrock is the original founder of Waste Management and today serves as its president. He has personally guided the organization from a tiny garbage hauling company to an international giant. In 1968 Waste Management had 12 trucks and total revenues of \$65,000; by 1986 the firm was operating in 40 states and several foreign countries and was earning net profits of \$380 million.

Along the way, the firm earned itself a reputation for the worst environmental record of any American corporation, paying record fines for illegal activities in many states. They have been convicted and fined across the country for price fixing and bid rigging. They have been fined for maintaining double sets of books to prevent authorities from learning about leaking landfills. They have been fined for selling PCB-contaminated oil to rural people as dust suppressants, and to homeowners as heating fuel. In a trial in Illinois, a Waste Management executive admitted under oath that the firm keeps special accounts for giving "promotional" gifts to politicians. The firm is reportedly under investigation today by six grand juries in six states.

Waste Management and Dean Buntrock have been able to buy anything they wanted, except respectability and an inside track to information about their only effective adversary: the grass roots environmental movement. But now even these things seem within Mr. Buntrock's grasp. The National Wildlife Federation (a large, wealthy traditional environmental organization--publisher of Ranger Rick magazine for kids) has now taken up the cudgel on behalf of Waste Management. Dean Buntrock has been elected to the Federation's board or directors. Anyone who writes to the Federation objecting to Mr. Buntrock's presence on their board receives a letter from the president of the Federation, Jay D. Hair, saying his Federation is composed of 51 "grass-roots affiliates" throughout the United States. Mr. Hair says these grass roots environmental groups "determine the conservation policies of the National Wildlife Federation, which has fought long and hard to reduce the threats posed by toxic wastes." Representatives of these grass roots organizations elected Mr. Buntrock to the board, says Mr. Hair.

Mr. Hair goes on, "Mr. Buntrock has pledged to support all of the conservation policies and goals of the National Wildlife Federation, including those related to toxics and waste disposal." And, he finishes with an unqualified endorsement of Waste Management itself: "We feel that Waste Management, Inc. is conducting its business in a responsible manner." Evidence? "We feel you should have the opportunity to review many of the same materials that we used in reaching our judgement and suggest that you write directly to Waste Management, Inc. for this information," Mr. Hair concludes. It is not known what Mr. Buntrock and Waste Management have promised to do for the Wildlife Federation in return for the valuable endorsement of their business methods.

No matter. With one of the nation's largest and wealthiest environmental organizations won over, Mr. Buntrock is now in a position to begin systematically acquiring information about his firm's only effective adversaries, the grass roots environmental movement.

Today the frontier of environmental action at the grass roots level is the "community right to know" movement. The federal Superfund amendments (known as SARA) require companies to begin this month to report details about their use of hazardous chemicals.

Charles Elkins, director of the EPA's Office of Toxic Substances says the new law represents nothing less than a "revolution" in the way society deals with toxic chemicals. [NY TIMES Feb. 14, 1988, pg. 1.] "Data on chemical hazards are going to be in peoples' home computers," he said. With the new information, Mr. Elkins says, "the American people can take the lead identifying problems and saying what is to be done about them." Mr. Elkins says he expects local citizens "empowered with knowledge" to bring pressure to force change.

There is no doubt that the SARA law has handed environmental groups an array of new weapons for confronting polluters. Across the country, creative new plans will be, and are being, developed by community groups as the SARA law kicks in.

To assist grass roots groups make effective use of SARA, a handful of environmental groups in Washington, DC, have formed a new organization called the Working Group on Community Right to Know. Participants include Clean Water Action, the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, Environmental Action, Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Campaign Against Toxic Hazards, the Environmental Policy Institute, U.S. Public Interest Research Group, the National Center for Policy Alternatives, and National Wildlife Federation. The Working Group's goal is to provide a clearinghouse for citizens who want to know how to use the powerful new law. They plan outreach to grass roots groups outside DC, to tell people about the law, and to learn what strategies, developed at the local level, are working. For example, recent minutes from a meeting of the Working Group includes a report on grass roots actions under way in Minnesota, Louisiana, Ohio, California, and Vermont.

Among the most active and hardworking members of the Working Group are two representatives from the National Wildlife Federation. In fact, it was one of them who, with Fred Millar, recently reported on grass roots right-to-know events in Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, California, and Vermont. We do not mean to impugn the good intentions of these individuals; we do not know them. However, we find it difficult to believe that Dean Buntrock of Waste Management can legitimately be denied access to these individuals' meeting minutes, memos, notes, documents, and records. After all, Mr. Buntrock is now their boss's boss.

With outreach for the Working Group being coordinated by Fred Millar of the Environmental Policy Institute--a respected member of the legitimate environmental community--the files of Working Group members are rapidly becoming the best single repository in the nation for grass roots strategic planning on community right to know. It would be an invaluable resource for industry to gain access to. It appears to us that Dean Buntrock of Waste Management, Inc. has gained access to it already.

Contact the Working Group at: 218 D St., SE, Washington, DC 20003; (202) 5442600. Contact National Wildlife Federation at 1412 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036-2266. Phone: (202) 797-6800. For abundant documentation on Waste Management's violations, send us \$6.00 for a copy of our report, "THE CHICKEN GUARDING THE FOXES" and relevant back issues of HWN.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: wmi; waste hauling industry; corruption; organized crime; citizen groups; environmentalists; nwf; dean buntrock; fines; pcbs; il; jay hair; conservation; rtk; epa; sara; clean water action; cchw; nrdc; national campaign against toxic hazards; environmental policy institute; us public interest research group; national center for policy alternatives; mn; la; oh; ca; vt; fred millar;