

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#64 - EPA Abandons Effort To License Ocean-Going Incineration Ships

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has "suspended all agency activities supporting its ocean incineration program" because of "severe budget constraints," the agency announced in early February. The agency said cancelling the program will save \$2.6 million per year. The program was to develop rules for ocean-going ships burning liquid hazardous wastes, to designate sites where such burning would be allowed, and to establish criteria for evaluating companies seeking permission to operate incinerator ships.

When the program was cancelled EPA was "nearing promulgation of final regulations for designating ocean incineration sites off the coasts of the U.S." and was just "weeks away" from seeking public comment on proposed regulations covering the permit application process and proposed criteria for evaluating permit applicants. The Gulf coast, the East coast, and the Pacific coast all have been considered as possible sites for ocean incineration in recent years. Citizen opposition has been massive and adamant.

The EPA had had only two applicants for an ocean burning permit--Chemical Waste Management, Inc. (CWMI), a subsidiary of the giant waste-hauler, Waste Management, Inc., and SeaBurn, Inc., of Greenwich, CT. CWMI owns two aging incinerator ships they bought from the Netherlands, but on New Year's Eve, 1987, CWMI withdrew its application angrily, blaming agency footdragging for its withdrawal, though to some environmentalists it looked like ChemWaste might just be playing possum. A spokesman for EPA said the agency's abandonment of its rulemaking program had nothing whatever to do with ChemWaste's withdrawal of its permit application a month earlier.

SeaBurn Inc. expressed surprise and disappointment at EPA's abandonment of the program. SeaBurn has no ships but claims to have received approval from the U.S. Coast Guard for a vessel design, and approval from the EPA for an incinerator design. They claimed to have received construction bids from shipyards but were awaiting an EPA permit before beginning ship construction. An earlier firm in the business, At-Sea Incineration, also of Greenwich, CT, had begun building two ships with federal loan money when they went bankrupt. The EPA decision throws into question the ownership of the two partially built ships that At-Sea had started to build in Tacoma, WA. Litigation is underway among private parties and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration, which had loaned money to At-Sea. The 1972 London Dumping Convention says an incinerator ship can only sail under the flag of a country that has "regulations resembling the parameters delineated under the convention." The U.S. has no such regulations so the ships, when completed, could not operate under U.S. flag in U.S. waters. It seems possible, however, that the ships could operate under foreign flag, or under the flag of a foreign subsidiary of a U.S. firm if the foreign country had issued the necessary regulations.

The EPA said that its suspension of its rulemaking for ocean incineration could be reversed if money becomes available in the future.

Beth Milleman of the Coast Alliance in Washington, DC, said she is "very pleased" by the EPA decision but said she did not understand "why they had to come up with that half baked story about losing their funding." She points out that for a decade EPA has continued to support ocean incineration as a method of hazardous waste disposal despite lack of public and congressional support, despite scientific and legal concerns raised during public debate on the issue, and despite the recent decision by several European governments to abandon ocean incineration in the North Sea by Jan. 1, 1995.

Ms. Milleman said EPA's decision to close up shop within weeks of ChemWaste's abandonment of its permit application was "no coincidence" and "speaks volumes about who is setting hazardous waste policy in this country." She added that "if the EPA has any

sense, they won't start the program up again." The Coast Alliance can be reached by phone: (202) 265-5518.

--Peter Montague

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U.S. DEATH RATE SURGED DURING SUMMER OF 1986: CAUSES DEBATED

A mysterious surge in the U.S. death rate during the summer of 1986 has statisticians and medical professionals confounded and disturbed. Data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, MD, reveal that somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 more Americans than usual died during the period May-August, 1986. Deaths from pneumonia were up 18.1 and deaths for "all infectious diseases" were up 22.5% compared to the same period in 1985.

Marvin Lavenhar, director of the division of biostatistics and epidemiology at the New Jersey Medical School in Newark, says, "You can't escape the fact that something happened in the summer of 1986."

The WALL STREET JOURNAL Feb. 8, 1988, reports that one researcher, Jay M. Gould of the Institute for Policy Studies, in Washington, DC, believes the increased deaths are statistically related to the cloud of radioactive fallout that covered the U.S. from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The cloud reached the U.S. in early May, 1986. The amount of fallout on this country varied from place to place with rainfall.

Mr. Gould compared deaths in each of the nation's nine census regions with the amount of radioactive iodine-131 reported by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) monitoring stations, which regularly measure radioactive iodine in cow's milk. In states like Arizona and Texas, iodine levels were lowest and so were deaths. In California and Washington state, iodine was highest and so were deaths. Mr. Gould reports a consistent pattern across the country: the higher the iodine levels, the higher the deaths. Infant mortality figures also correlated strongly with iodine levels. A statistical correlation does not prove a cause and effect relationship.

Mr. Gould's work has set off a debate among medical people. Most cannot accept the idea that modest increases in radioactive iodine and other fallout could cause such noticeable health effects. Fallout levels in Europe were 100 to 1000 times higher than they were in the U.S. during the same period and Europeans are not reporting increased death rates. Dr. Ernest J. Sternglass, emeritus professor of radiological physics at University of Pittsburgh, who has figured prominently in past controversies over the effects of low-level radiation on health, asserts that low doses of ingested radiation are more destructive of cell tissue than higher doses of shorter duration. Others dispute this hypothesis.

Neal Nelson, a radiation biologist with the EPA, says Mr. Gould's analysis is "of interest" and "should be evaluated on its merits." Dr. Donald Luria, chairman of the New Jersey Medical School's department of preventive medicine and community health says, "You cannot look at this blip on the data base and say 'So what?'" After a negative initial reaction to Mr. Gould's hypothesis Dr. Luria said, "I've been persuaded that there is enough there to merit a good look. It would be unwise to treat Gould's findings dismissively, and equally unwise to overinterpret them." Mr. Gould can be reached at (202) 234-9382.

--Peter Montague

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