

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#28 - Editorial--New Report Details Corruption & Pollution By Largest U.S. Dumper: WMI

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The grass roots environmental movement upped the stakes last month. Here is how it happened:

The Drury Lane Theater in Oak Brook, Illinois, is darkened. Before the assembled audience of 1000 stockholders, Dean L. Buntrock, chairman of the board of Waste Management, Inc. (WMI) stood illuminated in a single shaft of light, like a TV evangelist. It is May 15, 1987, and Mr. Buntrock begins to welcome the hushed audience to the annual board meeting of WMI, the world's largest and most fabulously successful waste dumping company. Mr. Buntrock begins his inspirational message describing the "fantastic year" Waste Management has enjoyed in 1986... when suddenly a tape recorded voice begins blaring at 110 decibels into the darkened hall, completely drowning out Mr. Buntrock's sermon. Heavy security guards rush into the darkened hall as the tape recorded voice thunders on, "Welcome to the annual stockholder's meeting... We are proud to announce that our company is racked by a series of investigations relating to bribery, insider trading, and environmental violations... We are especially pleased to announce that we have reached a record-breaking level of environmental fines, totaling over \$31 million through 1986... We are glad to be the subject of anti-trust investigations in three states, and corruption scandals in at least two... We are particularly happy because we have no environmental liability insurance for our toxic waste sites, at least 18 of which are leaking contaminants into local groundwater."

For 10 minutes the tape recorded voice blares on, totally disrupting the meeting. Security guards finally locate the tape recorder, powered by a motor cycle battery, in a brief case chained to a chair and, after considerable effort, snuff out the unwelcome voice.

A young woman in a dark suit is seen leaving the meeting amidst all the confusion, and driving off in a small car, headed for... the Great Lakes Regional Office of Greenpeace, the environmental organization that has given "environmental activism" new meaning... an organization the rest of the grass roots environmental movement is learning from.

An hour before the meeting was to begin, Greenpeace had delivered a ton of horse manure in a dump truck to the Drury Lane Theater. Then Greenpeace activists scaled an 80-foot sign and hung out a banner 26' x 10' long announcing to the arriving board members, "Waste Management Stinks."

But adding real substance, real injury, to these insults, came the coup de grace: release of a 58-page study, WASTE MANAGEMENT, INC.: THE GREENPEACE REPORT, which lays out, in abundant detail, the crimes of this company.

The report is packed with detailed information about the misdeeds of Dean Buntrock and his associates who entered the garbage business in 1968, competed for more than a decade against the Mafia, and emerged king of American garbage. Now the company has expensive headquarters in Oak Brook Illinois where they bought up an art collection and put it on the walls, they set up a laboratory with dozens of technicians wearing white coats, they recruited "respectable" businessmen like Alexander Trowbridge, former Secretary of Commerce, to sit on their board (for \$600,000 per year salary). And they bought time on National Public Radio, which never investigates the company too closely, in return for which the company helps this struggling "public interest" radio network air its show, "All things Considered." (Well, ALMOST all things considered.)

But for all its purchased "respectability," Waste Management, Inc., is still the same old garbage company it started out to be--making enormous sums of money by cutting deals, breaking laws, violating regulations, polluting air and water on a massive scale, paying off politicians, running rough shod over human health and ecological safety.

No one--not even the excellent GREENPEACE REPORT--has yet

tallied the full story on this company. WMI has more than 100 wholly-owned subsidiaries, with names like Instant Disposal Service, Inc., and Dump- All, Inc. They own at least 59 landfills and operate at least 37 more by lease (in the U.S.), making them by far the largest dumpers in America. They run a radioactive waste dump at Barnwell, South Carolina. But all this represents just a fraction of their operations. They are active in three provinces of Canada, in Australia, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia... and spreading at a steady 26% per year (5-year average), like a virulent plague. They gross more than a billion dollars a year from garbage and hazardous wastes, and after paying all their fines and paying off all the politicians who make their way of life possible, they put more than \$200 million in the bank, year after year.

Greenpeace gives separate sections to "monopolism," "corruption/contributions," "pollution," "favoritism," "deception," and "exploitation," then goes on to lay out case studies that will stand you hair on end. Where is Mr. Reagan's EPA in all this? In Waste Management's hip pocket. For a time, one of the EPA's highest officials was on retainer from Waste Management. But the WASHINGTON POST blew the whistle and now things are done with more finesse.

The GREENPEACE REPORT presents a record of environmental destruction and corporate disregard of human decency rivaled only by Johns Manville's willful decimation of its workers by asbestos, and Monsanto Chemical's global contamination of virtually every living thing on earth by PCBs.

The GREENPEACE REPORT is based on 210 published articles (listed on pgs. 51-58 of the report)--an invaluable list. This report is a major service to the grass roots movement and our hat is off to author Jim Vallette and to Greenpeace. It's only \$5 per copy from: Greenpeace, 1436 U St., NW, Washington, DC 20009; phone: (202) 462-1177.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: wmi; dean buntrock; greenpeace; strategies;