

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#16 - EPA Staff Ranks Environmental Problems According To Danger, Finds Agency Missing The Boat

March 15, 1987

A 75-member senior task force within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has released a report assessing the risks of 31 kinds of environmental problems, then ranking the EPA's own efforts to solve those problems. The 100page report reveals that much of the EPA's efforts are focused on low-risk problems, while many high-risk problems are receiving scant attention.

In releasing the report, EPA administrator Lee Thomas said the study represents "the first few sketchy lines of what might become the future picture of environmental protection in America."

The study revealed serious shortcomings in the data that the agency has available to it; the study team "ultimately had to fill substantial gaps in available data by using their collective judgement," says the report.

The study team ranked 31 categories of problems by four categories of risk; the four risk categories were: cancer risk, non-cancer health effects, ecological effects, and welfare effects (e.g., visibility impairment and damage to materials).

Problems ranking high in three out of four categories, or medium in all four categories, include: criteria air pollutants; stratospheric ozone depletion; pesticide residues in food; and pesticide runoff into surface water and air contamination by pesticides.

Problems that ranked high in cancer and non-cancer health effects, but low in ecological damage and welfare risks include: hazardous air pollutants; indoor radon gas; indoor air pollution other than radon; pesticide application; exposure to consumer products (e.g., hair dyes and sprays); and worker exposure to chemicals.

Problems that rank high in ecological damage but low in cancer and non-cancer health effects include: global warming; point and nonpoint source pollution of surface water; physical alternation of aquatic habitats (e.g., estuaries and wetlands); and mine wastes.

Risks related to groundwater consistently ranked low in all categories.

Problems ranked relatively high in risk but receiving little EPA attention include: indoor radon; indoor air pollution besides radon; global warming; stratospheric ozone depletion; nonpoint source pollution of surface water; discharges to estuaries, coastal waters and oceans; pesticides; accidental releases of toxics; consumer products; and worker exposures to toxic chemicals.

Relatively low-risk problems receiving major attention from the agency include: treatment storage and disposal facilities; abandoned hazardous waste sites; leaking underground storage tanks; and municipal nonhazardous waste sites, according to the report.

The report says it is "not necessarily inappropriate" that the agency is focused on many low-risk problems; in some cases, it may be the agency's attention that keeps those problems low risk. The report also points out that the agency's programs reflect public sentiment more closely than they reflect risks as measured in the report. The EPA notes that opinion polls show the public has "high concern" about chemical waste disposal; water pollution; chemical plant accidents, and chemical plant air pollution; and "medium concern" about oil spills; worker exposure; pesticides; and contaminated drinking water; and "low concern" about indoor air pollution; consumer products; and global warming.

The report, entitled "Unfinished Business: A Comparative Assessment of Environmental Problems," is probably not being distributed any longer by the EPA, but it's worth calling them: (202) 382-4012; if they won't send you a copy, Environmental Research Foundation will make copies available at cost (\$22.00). Send a check to us at P.O. Box 5036, Annapolis, MD 21403-7036. Sorry, we cannot invoice you and we aren't set up for plastic.

--Peter Montague

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EXPENSIVE NEW REPORT EXAMINES POTENTIAL FOR WASTE REDUCTION

A high-priced new report by a private firm deals with three major waste categories: aqueous toxic metal solutions; cyanide-bearing wastes; and solvents, oils, and other organic chemicals. Within each category, the report evaluates the potential for resource recovery and waste reduction within different types of industries that generate the wastes.

The 193-page report is available for \$1600 from Joan D'Alto, Frost & Sullivan, 106 Fulton Street, New York, NY 10038; phone (212) 233-1080.

--Peter Montague

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JERSEY HAS TOUGHEST WASTE LAWS IN THE COUNTRY, SURVEY REVEALS

New Jersey has the toughest and most comprehensive hazardous waste management programs and policies in the United States, according to a new report entitled, "The State of the States 1987." The report profiles the major environmental problems facing each state, describes the severity of each state's situation, and ranks the state programs designed to solve the problems.

According to the report, 21 states have passed laws to control underground storage tanks and 13 states have regulations in place for that purpose; 10 states have regulations restricting the pumping of wastes underground (deep well injection); 17 states have state, county or local programs for collection of household toxics; 13 states have restrictions on small-quantity generators stricter than those embodied in federal law; 21 states have passed community right-to-know laws; 37 states have programs to monitor hazardous waste sites for evidence of groundwater contamination.

Send \$10 to: Fund for Renewable Energy and the Environment, Suite 638, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 466-6880.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: nj; studies; legislation; regulations; hazardous waste; epa; studies; risk assessment; health effects; public health; pollution; hazardous waste; air pollution; ozone; food safety; pesticides; radon; consumer protection; consumer products; occupational safety and health; hair dyes; hair sprays; wetlands; mining; estuaries; indoor air pollution; sensible public policies; groundwater; drinking water; overviews; waste reduction;