

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#330 - N.Y. Times Resolves Toxics Dilemma The Old-Fashioned Way: Linguistic Detoxification

March 23, 1993

For some time, we have been warning our readers that major polluters and their friends are preparing an assault on the nation's two major toxic waste laws (Superfund and RCRA, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act). (See RHWN #271, #147, #139, for example.) One or the other of these two federal laws--and perhaps both--will be considered by Congress this year.

The NEW YORK TIMES began a front-page series on toxics and waste this week, printing long stories Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.[1] The Sunday article set the tone and the themes, beginning with the statement that "many scientists, economists and Government officials have reached the dismaying conclusion that much of America's environmental program has gone seriously awry. These experts say that in the last 15 years environmental policy has too often evolved largely in reaction to popular panics, not in reaction to sound scientific analyses of which environmental hazards present the greatest risks."

The main message of the TIMES stories is this: The nation's toxic waste program is itself a colossal waste because toxic chemicals, and especially toxic wastes, are not as dangerous as previously believed and perhaps are not dangerous at all. Furthermore, we got ourselves into this expensive mess because Congress didn't listen to the technical experts but listened instead to the voters.

Here is the TIMES'S argument in an nutshell:

1) Billions of dollars "are wasted each year in battling problems that are no longer considered especially dangerous." Examples are toxic dumps and asbestos in schools, the TIMES says.

2) "Since 1980, thousands of regulations were written to restrict compounds that had caused cancer in rats and mice, even though these animal studies often fail to predict how the compounds might affect humans."

3) There is a "new, third wave of environmentalism sweeping across America" composed of "farmers, homeowners and others who are upset largely by the growing cost of regulations that didn't appear to bring any measurable benefits." The only spokesperson for this "third wave of environmentalism" quoted by the TIMES on Sunday is Richard J. Mahoney, chairman of Monsanto, the chemical company.

4) This Third Wave has moved into "universities, city halls, state capitols, and even into the highest levels of the E.P.A. [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency]." At this point the TIMES quotes EPA's Science Advisory Board complaining that Congress has passed laws based on "public perception of risk rather than scientific understanding of risk."

5) The main message of these Third Wave environmentalists is that the "experts" have not been allowed to set America's environmental agenda; instead we have had "environmental agenda setting by episodic panic." In other words, our problem is too much democracy.

6) As a result of Congress's refusal to listen to the experts, America is spending \$140 billion per year on the environment (\$100 billion by the private sector, \$40 billion by government), which is roughly half what we spend on the military.[2] Not all the environmental money is wasted, says the TIMES. "Few experts question the wisdom of spending \$3 billion each year on new sewage treatment plants." But: "Many experts... question the wisdom of spending billions of dollars to protect people from traces of toxic compounds." The TIMES then quotes Dr. Richard Goodwin, whom they identify as a "private environmental engineer," who says we're wasting money on toxic dumps. The TIMES does not mention that Dr. Goodwin is a consultant to the incineration industry who has conducted a campaign to have toxic ash exempted from federal and state regulations. (See RHWN #189 and #191.)

7) "The toxic waste program stands as the most wasteful effort of all" because "many of the [abandoned chemical dump] sites pose little if any danger," the TIMES says, without offering any evidence.

8) To support its claim that dumps pose little or no danger, the TIMES then offers not evidence but another unsupported assertion (an assertion we've seen and evaluated previously--see RHWN #249, #275, #290, #292): "New research indicates that dioxin may not be so dangerous after all. None of the former residents of Times Beach [Mo.] have been found to be harmed by dioxin, and two years ago, Dr. Vernon N. Houk, the Federal official who urged the evacuation [of citizens living in Times Beach] declared that he had made a mistake."

9) The TIMES continues: While we're spending billions to protect the public from relatively harmless substances like dioxin, we're allowing real problems to grow unchecked. Examples are mercury in fish and lead in children, the TIMES says.

10) But back to the TIMES's main theme: "perhaps no environmental program has come under more criticism than the Superfund and its progeny," says the TIMES, launching into a lengthy description of a Superfund site in Mississippi where soil was cleaned up to a standard that would allow children to eat a half a teaspoonful of it every month for a lifetime without getting cancer. (Half a teaspoon a month for 70 years equals 3000 grams of soil.) The TIMES ridicules such cleanliness as a goal: "E.P.A. officials acknowledged that at least half of the \$14 billion spent on Superfund cleanups was used to comply with similar 'dirt-eating rules,' as they call them."

In making fun of the Superfund program, the TIMES fails to examine the basis for EPA's assumption that children need to be protected from industrial poisons in soil.

The cleanup standard that the TIMES ridicules is based on the assumption that children eat soil, which is in fact true. Contaminated soil is an important source of toxic lead in children.[3]

The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has studied children's behavior. It turns out that some children eat soil directly and other children merely transfer soil from their hands to their mouths. CDC estimates that 5 to 10 percent of all children eat dirt directly (a behavior pattern called "pica") and that such children may ingest an average of 8000 grams of soil during their first 5 years of life.[4] The best available evidence, therefore, indicates that the EPA's cleanup standard (3000 grams ingested during a lifetime) may not be strict enough to protect all children.

The first four articles in the TIMES'S series are remarkable in several respects: (1) they never mention pollution prevention; (2) they claim, or imply, numerous times that toxic chemicals and radioactivity have not harmed anyone, but they provide no evidence that this is true; (3) they ignore a large body of scientific literature that contradicts their claims and conclusions.

WE TOO BELIEVE AMERICA'S ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS AND PRIORITIES HAVE GONE AWRY DURING THE PAST 20 YEARS. BUT WE FIND THE Times's ANALYSIS WRONGHEADED, AND ALMOST ENTIRELY LACKING IN EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT ITS ASSERTIONS. FURTHERMORE, THE Times's WRITERS EXHIBIT A BREATHTAKING IGNORANCE OF BASIC FACTS.

WE VIEW THE Times's WORK AS AN OPENING SALVO IN THE CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE OVER THE NATION'S TOXIC WASTE LAWS. INDEED, THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS OPENED HEARINGS TODAY IN WASHINGTON, BASED PARTLY ON STATEMENTS AND VIEWPOINTS IN THE Times's SERIES. THE DEBATE IS ON. STAY TUNED.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Keith Schneider, "New View Calls Environmental Policy Misguided," NEW YORK TIMES March 21, 1993, pgs. 1, 30; Michael Specter, "Sea- Dumping Ban: Good Politics, But Not Necessarily Good Policy," NEW YORK TIMES March 22, 1993, pgs. 1, B8; Joel Brinkley, "Animal Tests as Risk Clues: The Best Data May Fall Short," NEW YORK TIMES March 23, 1993, pgs. 1, 16; Keith Schneider, "How a Rebellion Over Environmental Rules Grew From a Patch of Weeds," NEW YORK TIMES March 24, 1993, pg. A16.

[2] Ruth Leger Sivard, WORLD MILITARY AND SOCIAL EXPENDITURES 1991, 14TH EDITION. (Washington, DC: World Priorities, 1991), pg. 51.

[3] Patrick L. Reagan and Ellen K. Silbergeld, "Establishing a Health- Based Standard for Lead in Residential Soils," TRACE SUBSTANCES IN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH Vol. 23 (1990), pgs. 199-238.

[4] R. D. Kimbrough and others, "Health implications of 2,3,7,8-tetra- chloro-dibenzo-dioxin (TCDD) contamination of residential soil," JOURNAL OF TOXICOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH Vol. 14 (1984), pgs. 47- 93.

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