

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#258 - Hazardous Waste Is Legally 'Recycled' Into Pesticides And Labeled 'Inert'

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Today fewer than 20 corporations own and operate better than 90% of all the major newspapers, magazines, radio stations, book publishers, and TV stations in America. If current trends hold, by the end of the century as few as 10, or even 6, companies may own them all.[1]

An equally important trend is that news reporters now rely heavily on public relations firms for stories. Not that the journalists themselves like it that way. When 2432 journalists were given a list of animals and asked to choose which is "most like a PR person," 71% said weasel, 11 percent said fox, 2 percent dog, and 1 percent worm.[2] Nevertheless, 81% of journalists said they need PR people; 38% SAID THEY GET HALF THEIR STORIES FROM THEM; 31% said they relied on PR people for 5 to 10 stories a week; 15% said they relied on them for more than 10 stories; 17 PERCENT SAID THEY USED PR PEOPLE FOR EVERY STORY.

Local news reporters said they get only 15% of their stories from PR people; editors of lifestyle pages put the figure at 60%, and among entertainment editors, the figure is 75%. REPORTERS CREDIT PR PEOPLE AS THE SOURCE FOR 90% OF ALL STORIES ON HEALTH. The environment, of course, is part of the "health" beat.

Clearly the polluters are managing to manage the news. It is therefore increasingly important for an aggressive, independent alternative press to thrive and prosper. Publications ranging from E THE ENVIRONMENTAL MAGAZINE to NACE NEWS, PAHLS JOURNAL, WASTE NOT and EVERYONE'S BACKYARD provide news and information that never get considered by the mainstream media--either because the big news organizations are owned by polluters, or because the PR firms who "package" health and environment stories are owned or influenced by polluters.[3]

In June of this year a first-rate alternative newspaper called GREEN LINE in western North Carolina broke a story that is still echoing across the land.[4] Reporter Andrea Helm discovered a loophole in federal laws that allows hazardous chemical wastes to be included in pesticides and labeled "inert ingredients." Yes, that's right--the pesticides that your neighbor sprayed on his lawn (and probably on your dog) may legally contain hazardous wastes, including many that are carcinogenic, mutagenic, or teratogenic. And it's perfectly legal.

An "inert ingredient" in a pesticide is anything not registered as an "active ingredient." The "active ingredient" is the poison. The purpose of an "inert" is to preserve the active ingredient, make the active ingredient easier to apply, or make the active ingredient work better. For example, an "inert" might soften the skin of the target species, making it easier for the poison to penetrate the body. Or an "inert" might be an oily substance that prevents rain from washing the poison away. A typical pesticide is 1% to 20% active ingredient (by weight) and 80% to 99% "inerts."

The Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides recently received from U.S. EPA's Office of Pesticides and Toxic Substances a list of 2000 chemicals that have been approved for use as "inert" ingredients in pesticides. The list includes such things as carbon tetrachloride, toluene, xylene, cadmium and lead compounds.[5]

A little-known exemption in RCRA (the nation's basic hazardous waste law) allows hazardous wastes to be "recycled" into pesticides as "inert" ingredients.

It is interesting--and perhaps entirely coincidental--that the nation's largest waste hauler--Waste Management, Inc.--started buying into the pesticide business in the late 1980s. In 1987 Waste Management, Inc. made an unsuccessful bid to buy Chemlawn. However WMI persisted and now owns Trugreen in Alpharetta, GA, ABC Pest Control in San Antonio, TX, Biltmore/Getz Pest Control, WM Pest Control of Oak Brook, IL, United Pest Control of Washington, DC, and other lawn care and pest control companies.

Recently, WMI has reportedly consolidated many of its pesticide companies into something called ServiceMaster Consumer Services Limited Partnership, which is 20% owned by Waste Management, Inc.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) press officer Al Hire told reporter Andrea Helm that allowing recycled hazardous waste in pesticides is "a way of disposing of hazardous materials." Two days later, when Helm phoned to check the quotation, Hire changed it to "a way of USING hazardous materials." Either way, there can be no doubt that "recycling" hazardous waste into pesticides is a perfectly legal and EPA-approved way of "using" hazardous wastes.

The Lake Michigan Federation (LMF)--a group of citizen activists with offices in four cities--recently documented a case of "recycling" a hazardous waste as an "inert" ingredient in pesticides.[6] A company called Granulated Technologies (Grantech) in Green Bay, Wisconsin, is buying toxic sludge from the Fort Howard Paper Company; Fort Howard produces the sludge when it de-inks paper in its paper-recycling process. (Yes, paper recycling is a toxic business if the paper is de-inked and then bleached with chlorine.) Grantech heats and dries the sludge to convert it into small pellets to be used as carriers for agricultural pesticides and fertilizers, and perhaps also as kitty litter. Because Grantech is recycling the toxic sludge, it escapes regulation under RCRA, the nation's hazardous waste law.

LMF is publicizing EPA data on the chemical contents of the sludge. A year's worth of the dried sludge contains 301 pounds of styrene, 287 pounds of 2,4,6-trichlorophenol, 1921 pounds of naphthalene, 5629 pounds of bis(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate, 5814 pounds of chromium, 1643 pounds of lead, 33 pounds of mercury, 122 pounds of thallium, 278,897 pounds of zinc, and so on.

Other compounds identified in the sludge are 2,3,7,8-TCDD (the most potent of the dioxins), 2,3,7,8-TCDF (a dibenzo furan) and a range of chlorinated phenols, chlorinated catechols, chlorinated guaiacols, and chlorinated benzaldehydes. Toxic soup.

This is not something you want to put on your garden, yet that is where Grantech intends to put it, with the blessing of state and federal environmental agencies.

Once again government is trying to "linguistically detoxify" hazardous waste, this time by calling it "inert" because it is being "recycled." From the viewpoint of public health and safety there is only one real solution to this shell game: banning some chemicals (chlorine is a prime candidate) and reducing the use of others in a phased, monitored program of chemical control. In other words, pollution prevention. These are realities the mainstream press is evidently unable to report. Hats off to Andrea Helm and to GREEN LINE for breaking this important story.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Ben H. Bagdikian, MEDIA MONOPOLY. THIRD EDITION (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[2] Associated Press, "Poll finds PR 'weasels' needed," ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT, September 11, 1991, pg. 2D. The survey was done by Jericho Promotions, a PR firm in New York City at (212) 260-3744; Jericho has twice promised to send us the study free but has never actually sent it.

[3] E THE ENVIRONMENTAL MAGAZINE is published by Earth Action Network, P.O. Box 5098, Westport, CT 06851. NACE NEWS is published by Native Americans for a Clean Environment, P.O. Box 1617, Talequah, OK 74465. PAHLS JOURNAL is published by People Against Hazardous Landfill Sites, 102 North Morgan, Valparaiso, IN 46383. WASTE NOT is published by Work

on Waste USA, 82 Judson Street, Canton, NY 13617. EVERYONE'S BACKYARD is published by Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040.

[4] Andrea Helm, "EPA Waste Policy Threatens Health," GREEN LINE Vol. 4 No. 9 (June, 1991), pgs. 1, 16-18. [GREEN LINE, P.O. Box 144, Ashville, NC 28802; (704) 251-1333.]

[5] For further information on hazardous chemicals used as "inerts" in pesticides, contact Colehour Arden or Norma Grier at Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP), P.O. Box 1393, Eugene, OR 97440; phone (503) 344-5044. You will also want to know about NCAP's publication, the JOURNAL OF PESTICIDE REFORM. See also Stephen Lester, "Secret Ingredients in Pesticides: Toxic Waste," EVERYONE'S BACKYARD Vol. 9, No. 5 (October, 1991), pgs. 7-8. And: Robert Abrams, THE SECRET HAZARDS OF PESTICIDES (Albany, NY: NY State Department of Law, June, 1991). Available free from the Manhattan office of the New York State Department of Law, 120 Broadway, NY, NY 10271; (212) 341-2070. And: Jay Feldman, "Statement of Jay Feldman... Before the Subcommittee on Toxic Substances, Environmental Oversight, Research and Development, Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate, May 9, 1991. Available from National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, 701 E Street, SE, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20003; phone (202) 543-5450.

[6] For more information contact Rebecca Leighton, Lake Michigan Federation, 1270 Main St., Green Bay, WI 54302; (414) 432-5253.

Descriptor terms: hazardous waste; pesticides; inert ingredients; recycling; carcinogens; mutagens; teratogens; northwest coalition for alternatives to pesticides; epa; office of pesticides and toxic substances; carbon tetrachloride; toluene; xylene; cadmium; lead; wmi; chemlawn; granulated technologies; grantech; green bay, wi; wi; fort howard paper company; rcra; linguistic detoxification; bans; chlorine;