

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#238 - New Front In The Waste Wars -- Part 1: The Regulatory-Industrial Complex

June 18, 1991

The partnership between government and the waste "management" industry continues to flourish. Industry produced 345 million tons of legally-hazardous waste in 1990 [1] and government takes the position that government has an obligation to provide waste disposal service for all those toxins. This means government has got to find citizens who are willing to accept massive amounts of poisons dumped or burned in their backyards. Willing citizens are harder and harder to find, so government agents now employ special methods of persuasion to try to convince skeptics that waste disposal is "safe," meaning that the "risks" are "acceptable." Simply holding public hearings (which they glorified with the title "public participation" in the '80s) didn't do the trick, so an artful technique called "risk assessment" was developed. The explicit aim of risk assessment is to convince people that some number of citizens must be killed each year to maintain a national lifestyle based on necessities like Saran Wrap, throw-away cameras and lawns without dandelions.

When persuasion fails, government simply tries to bully people into accepting waste disposal facilities. For example, the people of Jacksonville, Arkansas, have voted on three occasions not to allow government and industry to erect an incinerator in the middle of a residential area in their town for the purpose of burning highly-toxic chemical warfare wastes--but the regulatory-industrial complex has evidently decided that it needs to set a precedent burning such wastes in human communities, so EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) is pressing ahead despite well-justified fears and opposition by local people.[2]

With municipal solid waste (msw), the story is the same. Americans produced an estimated 170 million tons of msw in 1990,[3] much of it toxic and dangerous though not legally "hazardous." Increasingly, citizens are opposing landfills and incinerators in favor of recycling and waste reduction. But government takes the position that government has an obligation to provide waste disposal facilities. Why?

The waste "management" industry is one that can be readily monopolized by the people who own landfills and incinerators; the owners of such facilities can simply refuse to accept wastes from competitive haulers. Thus competition can be readily eliminated and waste "management" firms can charge higher and higher prices for their services. In contrast, recycling, and waste reduction are not easily monopolized by a few large firms. Any enterprising citizen can get into the recycling business and, by developing a better mousetrap, can grab a share of the market.

The federal government has formed an unspoken but obvious alliance with the giant waste haulers--those who own the most landfills and all of the incinerators. Many of the corporate officers in these firms used to be government officials themselves--they wrote the regulations that created the modern waste "management" industry. Many of today's top government officials--the ones who make policy--can look forward to highly-paid jobs with waste "management" firms when they retire from government service. This phenomenon is now so common that it has been given a special name--the "revolving door." The waste "management" firms also make generous contributions to election campaigns, so one hand washes the other. It is therefore not surprising that government has decided it has an obligation to provide waste disposal locations--landfills and incinerators--whether local citizens want them or not. The alternative--waste reduction--is inconvenient for the producers of waste and financial death for the waste "management" industry.

Perhaps most importantly, industry aggressively opposes any serious efforts by government to force waste reduction because this represents government intrusion into manufacturing processes. For 200 years American industry has guarded its right to make all manufacturing decisions, regardless of the consequences for the rest of society. Few politicians are willing to risk the wrath of powerful industrial leaders, so government shies away from policies that would force waste reduction and, instead, forms alliances with

industry to find sites for more dumps and incinerators.

Given the kinds of waste disposal technologies that are available today (landfills, injection wells, and incinerators), only a fool would willingly accept a waste disposal facility in his or her backyard. Even risk assessment enthusiasts admit that the closer you are to such a facility the greater the chance that you will be among the unlucky souls selected at random to die in the name of progress. There are a few communities where political leadership is in such short supply that elected officials (often with a little help from their friends in the waste disposal industry) are embracing proposals for new dumps and incinerators. However, even in these communities, many people know in their bones waste disposal is always dirty and dangerous, and they are fighting it.

Traditionally, waste disposal has been dirty. However, during the last 50 years, with the rise of the American chemical industry and the development of a modern lifestyle based on thousands of toxic compounds, waste disposal has become not only dirty but also truly dangerous.

The traditional place to put waste dumps and incinerators was "on the other side of the tracks"--in the part of town where African-Americans, Hispanics Asian-Americans, and poor whites lived. This pattern has now been thoroughly documented in a new book[4] by Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*--a study of "the imposition of all types of toxins on black communities through the siting of garbage dumps, hazardous-waste landfills, incinerators, smelter operations, paper mills, chemical plants, and a host of other polluting industries."

As African-American and Hispanic communities have organized themselves to oppose the regulatory-industrial complex, the grass-roots movement for environmental justice has become broader, deeper, more diverse, and much more powerful. It has become difficult for industry and its acolytes in government to find any communities willing to sacrifice their quality of life and the lives of their citizens just so Dow and DuPont can continue making exotic substitutes for traditional materials (glass, iron, cotton, wool, and wood).

The federal government has therefore now opened up a new front in the waste wars. Uncle Sam is working hand-in-glove with dozens of waste companies eager to site dumps and incinerators on land belonging to native peoples, out in Indian Country. Details next week.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Monica P. Muniak and others, *A COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS OF HAZARDOUS WASTE MANAGEMENT* (Cleveland Heights, Oh: Leading Edge Reports, December, 1990), pg. 2. Available for \$1950.00 from: Leading Edge reports, 12417 Cedar Rd., Cleveland Heights, Oh 44106; phone (216) 791- 5500.."

[2] The Jacksonville story has been told well by Stephanie Abarbanel, "Toxic Nightmare on Main Street," *FAMILY CIRCLE* August 14, 1990, pgs. 77-80, 120-128.

[3] Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), *FACING AMERICA'S TRASH; WHAT NEXT FOR MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE* [OTA-O-424] (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October, 1989), pg. 73. 400 pgs. \$16.00 from U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402-9325. Order GPO Stock No. 052003-01168-9.

[4] Robert D. Bullard, *DUMPING IN DIXIE; RACE, CLASS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press [5500 Central Ave., Boulder, CO 80301; phone (303) 444-3541], 1990).

Descriptor terms: hazardous materials; risk assessment; jacksonville,
ar; ar; epa; solid waste industry; federal; revolving door; race;
african-americans; latinos; hispanics; asian-americans; bullard;
citizen groups;