

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#233 - Toxics Activist's Home Is Torched; Despite Setback, Her New Report On Hazards Of Incinerators May 14, 1991

The home and office of long-time environmental activist Pat Costner burned to the ground the night of March 2; last month an arson investigator confirmed that the one-story building in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, had been torched by an arsonist who spread gasoline throughout the interior before setting it afire. Costner was away from her home at the time and no one was physically harmed by the blaze, but the home-and-office was reduced entirely to ashes in less than two hours. A chemist and environmentalist for nearly 30 years, Costner's library of technical books and reports, and her extensive computer files of quotations from scientific documents, were destroyed in the blaze, along with all her personal possessions. Costner, 50, and her three children had built the home with their own hands over the past 17 years. "I was left, literally, with the clothes on my back," she said, adding with a wry smile, "But at least I still had those." Her computer was insured but her home was not.

Costner is perhaps most widely known for her early book, *We All Live Downstream*, which she wrote while co-director of the National Water Center, which she founded with Barbara Harmony in the mid-'70s in Eureka Springs. The book advocates what was at that time a new approach to water and wastewater management, emphasizing the benefits of dry composting toilets. For the past five years, Costner has served as research director for the toxics program of Greenpeace U.S.A., the U.S. affiliate of Greenpeace International. Among toxics activists, Costner is known for her dry humor, her strategic thinking on toxics use reduction, and her kindness. She reserves her most biting wit, bordering on contempt, for scientists who lie and for companies who poison the poor.

"Pat has been an intellectual leader in the toxics movement throughout the '70s and '80s," says Bill Walsh, director of the Greenpeace Toxics Program. "Pat was the first person I ever heard say we needed zero discharge of toxic materials. She has helped the grass-roots movement carry out its strategy of 'stopping up the toilet' to make waste disposal scarce and therefore expensive. The aim is to discourage waste production. Pat has an awful lot of friends in the movement, but naturally she's made some enemies in industry over the years."

A native of Arkansas who left after college, then worked as an industrial chemist before returning home in the early '70s, Costner established an independent analytic laboratory in Eureka Springs which she ran for about 10 years to support her environmental work. Before that she was a research chemist for Syntex in Colorado and for Shell Oil in Texas.

In recent months, Costner has been putting the finishing touches on a new report she had spent nearly five years preparing; ironically called *Playing With Fire*, it presents a technical attack on hazardous waste incineration, offering evidence that it is an exceptionally dirty technology that spreads a broad array of dangerous chemicals into surrounding air and soil. Despite the setback created by the arson attack, *Playing With Fire* will be released by Greenpeace May 22.

Costner had recently testified, or had presented written testimony, against various hazardous waste incinerator proposals, many of which have since collapsed, costing their proponents millions of dollars. She is an especially convincing critic of the technology because of her technical expertise, and her antiincineration work has taken its toll on the industry in recent years. Specific projects that Costner has helped kill or cripple include a massive proposal in Arizona by the incinerator firm, Ensco, of El Dorado, Arkansas, which was canceled by Arizona governor Fife Symington on May 3, and the MRK Company's proposal to burn dioxin-contaminated chemical-biological warfare (CBW) agents in a residential section of Jacksonville, Arkansas. The MRK incinerator had gone through its trial burn, an expensive test intended to show the incinerator can operate within legally establish pollution limits; Costner submitted written comments and the trial burn data were thrown out and a new trial burn scheduled. The multi-million-dollar project is now on hold. MRK has headquarters 15 miles from Eureka Springs. In

addition, Costner had recently testified against a Waste-Tech incinerator on Kaw Indian land in Oklahoma, and she had also recently opposed a CTI incinerator in Ft. Morgan, CO. Both those projects are now dead.

A report by Investigative Services Co. of Cordova, Tennessee, an arson investigation firm, concluded the Costner home was intentionally torched by someone using an accelerant, most likely gasoline. The report cited data from the National Fire Protection Association indicating that normal temperatures in a house fire do not exceed 300o to 500o F near the floor and 1800o F near the ceiling. In Costner's home, steel bedsprings melted, indicating temperatures of at least 2700o Fahrenheit, and the aluminum bases of two office chairs melted "into a puddle," indicating floor temperatures of at least 1300o F. Furthermore, debris from the ashes, sent to the AK Analytical Services Laboratory in Hendersonville, TN, revealed traces of gasoline. An empty gasoline can was found in the ashes of what had been the middle of Costner's living room floor. "They not only burned down my home and office, they left me a message that they had done it," Costner said, referring to the gasoline can.

In a written report filed with the Eureka Springs sheriff March 4, Costner said that on two occasions in recent months, neighbors had told her that "tough looking men" had come to Eureka Springs asking where she lived, "even though I am in the phone book. I was at home on both occasions, but no one came to see me," she said. Her home was eight miles from Eureka Springs, 1.5 miles off a highway on a dead-end gravel road. Local authorities say their investigation has not yet turned up any suspects. The FBI has been asked to join the investigation, at the suggestion of the Arkansas state police.

Local businesses and individuals in Eureka Springs raised several thousand dollars locally to help Costner rebuild (see photograph above) and several grassroots groups, including Native Americans for a Clean Environment (NACE) in Oklahoma, have held fundraisers. Greenpeace has established a Pat Costner fund that has so far received donations totaling over \$10,000 from Greenpeace staff; additional donations are welcome. Make checks payable to the Pat Costner Fund, and mail to Greenpeace, 1436 U Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009. All together, donations so far have totaled more than \$14,000. Costner's home had an estimated value of \$25,000 and her collection of books, reports, and manuscripts--the largest Greenpeace technical library in North America--was essentially priceless.

Costner's book, *WE ALL LIVE DOWNSTREAM*, is available for \$9.00 from: The National Water Center, P.O. Box 264, Eureka Springs, AR 72632; (501) 2539431.

Costner's new report, *PLAYING WITH FIRE*, will be released May 22. Activists can reserve a copy by sending \$10.00 to *Playing With Fire*, c/o Greenpeace, 1436 U St., NW, Washington, DC 20009. Phone (202) 462-1177. For companies, the price is \$100.00

--Peter Montague

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