

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#140 - What Have Nimbys Done For Me Lately

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The term Nimby is now at least 10 years old. So far as we can trace the term back, it was invented by the nuclear power industry to describe people who opposed the siting of nuclear power plants nearby.

There are three nimby positions:

- 1) Society needs these things but I don't want one near me because they're dangerous, so put it near someone else;
- 2) Society needs these things but I don't want one near me because they're dangerous, and therefore no one should live near one, so site them all remote from humans;
- 3) Society does not need any of these things and/or would be better off without them, so I oppose siting them anywhere.

People trying to site new waste facilities (dumps and incinerators) like to classify all their opponents as Nimbys of the first kind. The first type of Nimby gives a self-centered but rational response to a problem. Nimbys of the second and third kinds are not only rational, but they also have a broader perspective.

Those who want to site new waste facilities argue:

- 1) Incinerators and dumps are no more dangerous than other things people routinely accept;
- 2) They meet all government regulations;
- 3) Society has an obligation to accept these facilities because society DEMANDS the products that create the wastes;
- 4) Society has an obligation to accept these facilities because they are better than the facilities they replace.

We'll discuss these points in order:

1) People have a right to choose the risks they are willing to endure, and one person has no inherent right to impose a risk on another person. If I choose to accept the risks of smoking tobacco but I refuse to allow you to truck radioactive wastes through my neighborhood, that is a legitimate choice for me to make. You may disagree with my particular choice, and you may wish to make different choices for yourself, but you have no right to impose your choice on me. Even if "you" represent the majority, it is still dubious whether you have the right to impose your hazards on me; the Constitution presumes that you do NOT have that right and we have elaborate legal mechanisms for settling such questions.

2) Unfortunately, federal and state regulations are so skimpy (so few, so lax, so unenforced) that waste facilities can be quite dangerous and still meet all regulations. For example, as NEWSWEEK points out (July 24, 1989, pg. 28), after 19 years of effort, Congress and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have established air quality regs for only seven toxic air pollutants. Municipal solid waste incinerators emit at least 216 chemicals (or classes of chemicals, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, many of which cause cancer in animals) [see RHWN #35], so it is entirely reasonable to believe that one's health may be harmed by a municipal solid waste incinerator that meets every regulation. The regs simply don't protect public health and safety.

But let's be specific. We are currently opposing a new mass burn incinerator in Falls Township, PA, about six miles from our office. It will burn 2250 tons per day of municipal solid waste. The proponent of the project (Wheelabrator) admits the plant will emit the following pollutants each year: lead, 5 tons; non-methane hydrocarbons, 8 tons; mercury, 17 tons; nitrogen oxides, 2248 tons; sulfur dioxide, 853 tons; hydrogen chloride (acid), 777 tons; sulfuric acid mist, 87 tons; fluorides, 18 tons; particles (PM10), 98 tons; cadmium, 580 pounds; nickel, 580 pounds.

This is a "state-of-the-art" incinerator, the very best that money can buy, says Wheelabrator. But the lead emissions equal the amount of lead put out by 2500 AUTOMOBILES DRIVING for a year on leaded gasoline; the U.S. is phasing out leaded gasoline because of the airborne lead hazard--does it make sense to now burn garbage and introduce a new lead hazard? It does not. Any of the three Nimby responses to such a proposal makes sense.

Look at the mercury emissions from this state-of-the-art furnace: 17 tons per year. Back in 1971, the largest mercury polluters (paper companies) rapidly cut their mercury emissions below one ton per year-- and then they changed technologies to pollute even less. Mercury accumulates in the food chain and has serious, irreversible effects on the human brain--it destroys brain cells, leaving tiny cavities inside the skull. Again, any of the three Nimby responses make sense.

Look at the other pollutants on the list: fluorides, cadmium, and nickel are toxic; non-methane hydrocarbons are a mixed brew of carcinogens; nitrogen oxides (2248 tons of them) contribute to the world's worsening acid rain problem.

Wheelabrator will put the ash from this operation (562 tons of it each day, 7 days a week) into a double-lined landfill. After 20 years, Wheelabrator will walk away from the dump, leaving local people to worry about the following quantities of toxic heavy metals, which will never degrade: 242,260 pounds of arsenic, 271,000 pounds of cadmium, 546,140 pounds of chromium, 1,067,620 pounds of nickel, and 23,569,860 pounds of lead. This is a "state of the art" double-lined landfill, the best that money can buy, Wheelabrator says. The HDPE (high density polyethylene) liners are guaranteed by the liner manufacturer not to leak for 20 years. But the metals are guaranteed (by God, or Nature) to remain toxic for millenia. Again, any of the three Nimby responses make sense.

These proposals could only slip through if local citizens remained glued to their TV sets. It is a credit to their alertness, their concern, and their energy that they are fighting these proposals vigorously. If it weren't for the Nimbys (of all three kinds), these proposals would be sailing through unopposed.

3) People may use the products that industry makes, but people do not demand that they be made with dangerous chemicals. The consumer demand for dangerous chemicals is created by the companies that use dangerous chemicals in manufacture. In the 1970s, when American consumers boycotted (later outlawed) chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in spray cans, to protect the earth's ozone shield in the stratosphere, CFC demand plummeted. In response, the CFC producers set their marketing departments to work and developed replacement markets in the electronics industry, where CFCs are now the standard way of cleaning circuit boards. The CFC manufacturers had hundreds of millions of dollars tied up in CFC production plants and felt they couldn't afford to lose their investment. But to blame the consumer, claiming the consumer created the demand for these products, is simply not true. The marketing of newly-created products is carefully managed to manipulate consumer demand. For example, the campaign to shift consumers to plastic bags at the grocery store had three phases: during the first phase, the supermarket checker asked you if you wanted paper or plastic; in phase two, you had to ask for paper; in the final stage, you accepted plastic or nothing.

4) Newsweek magazine claimed July 24 that Nimbys must be "arrested" because "Nimby patrols oppose nearly all construction of new waste facilities, which has the effect of locking society in to already-existing facilities--the lousy old designs." But the truth is, the new designs suffer from the same flaws as the old designs: they are inadequate to protect the public and the planet. The new designs are simply the lousy old designs dressed up with a fresh coat of whitewash. There are sound reasons to oppose them and, until adequate designs are put forth, Nimbys of all three kinds provide a

needed service to the nation.

--Peter Montague

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lead; mercury; nitrogen oxides; fluoride; arsenic; air pollution;
water pollution; beryllium; sulfur dioxide; cadmium; nickel; fine
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