

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#138 - The Polluters' Secret Plan, And How You Can Mess It Up!

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People united for environmental justice are succeeding on a grand scale. From one end of America to the other, polluters and their pals in government are meeting unrelenting citizen opposition to bad waste disposal projects. These efforts are so effective that projects are going down the tubes left and right.

It has become impossible to site a hazardous waste landfill (so far as we know, there is only one such proposal left with a reasonable chance of being built--a BFI dump in Colorado). Hazardous waste incinerators are under attack everywhere; the situation is so bad that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has abandoned all pretense of "protection," blatantly trying to rescue embattled incinerators, but the people are making themselves heard with unremitting vigor. Municipal dumps are under constant attack in every state. Sludge incinerators are harder and harder to defend. Radioactive waste landfills are as popular as bubonic plague.

Naturally, the polluters are concerned. They need waste facilities to "get rid of" their pollution. Without somebody, someplace to take their wastes, they'd have to rethink industrial processes to avoid waste and prevent pollution. Over the past two decades, established environmental groups and the polluters (industry and government together) have formed an uneasy alliance, attacking each other, suing each other, arguing and debating over parts per million, best available control technology, state of the art risk assessments, and the other buzzwords embodied into new legislation after Earth Day 1970. Finally, during the early '80s, the warring parties reached agreement that "risk assessment" is the best way to decide how to proceed, and they agreed that it is acceptable to kill a certain number of innocent citizens. One killed per million exposed is now the accepted definition of "acceptable risk," though occasionally both industry and government try to lower the standard to one killed per 100,000 exposed, thus increasing the human sacrifice tenfold. In return for being allowed to take the lives of citizens without due process, the polluters are supposed to provide jobs and a high standard of living for at least 60% of the people; about 20% are to remain officially poor, and another 20% are to remain in economic limbo; for its part in this unwritten agreement, government gets financial rewards for elected officials and simple power for agency bureaucrats, many of whom later go to work for industry.

Unfortunately, the people directly impacted--the people most likely to be killed or maimed or made sick--generally weren't invited into this decade-long discussion. And now these powerless people have decided to come to the bargaining table, invited or not. The result has been a spontaneous, sometimes rowdy, outpouring of the human spirit as thousands upon thousands of local groups have said, first, "Not in my back yard." Quickly, these groups, one after another, have broadened this narrow, self-defeating view into, "Not in ANYONE'S back yard," which has proven to be an unbeatable strategy. From these unconnected fights, the movement for environmental justice has been born.

Naturally, the polluters are concerned. They have much at stake in the projects being defeated. Furthermore, they have made a huge investment over the past two decades--learning to cope with the barrage of environmental legislation of the '70s and early '80s--and much of that investment is in danger of going down the tubes. People are just saying "No" to dumping, "No" to sickening air pollution from incinerators, "No" to political compromises that result in "acceptable" risks that sacrifice the voiceless, the powerless, and the poor.

In response to the new grass roots environmental movement focused on justice, industry has hired an army of consultants to advise them how to get what they want. Conferences and symposia and workshops have been held. Massive "education campaigns" have been undertaken on TV. People have been hired who have college degrees in "community relations." Tired and disgruntled employees of major environmental groups have been propositioned to run interference, and some have accepted. Major polluters have wooed, and won, positions on the boards of directors of large

environmental organizations. Industry has begun a counter- attack against their most potent adversaries, the Nimbys.

But never fear. The polluters do not have anything up their sleeve that you cannot handle. For the same reasons they create all the waste to begin with, they aren't very good at countering Nimbys: They're just not all that sharp. Besides, you have two unique factors going for you: First, you are right and they are not. Second, they are hired guns, doing what they do because they're paid to do it. In contrast, your main motivation is the passionate defense of your family and home.

But now you have even more going for you, as a result of a new 36-page pamphlet that lays bare industry's strategy: THE POLLUTERS' "SECRET PLAN" AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MESS IT UP! by Will Collette, chief organizer at Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW).

Besides being one of the country's most experienced organizers, Will is a terrific writer, so he describes and dissects the industry strategy with great wit and humor. Actually, he lays out SEVERAL industry strategies: First he gives the "Outlines of a Polluter's Battle Plan" in which he describes the steps that polluters (and their supporters in government) take to trip up citizens who are opposing facilities. Then he describes industry's "Cerrell strategy" for siting new facilities in locations where people are least likely to be able or willing to resist. He then moves on to describe the GUMBY strategy ("give us many back yards")--industry's simultaneous attack on many sites, hoping to win at least one. He covers industry's use of risk assessments to have their way with you ("divide and conquer"), and government's attempt to shore up industry in this effort ("What you say doesn't matter.") The longest section is on industry's SLAPP strategy ("strategic lawsuit against public participation") in which Will tells you how to avoid a lawsuit and what to do in the highly-unlikely event of a suit.

For each of these strategies, which have been culled from industry trade journals, and from Will's years on the street, he offers ways to counteract polluters' assaults. Often he shows how to turn a polluter's attacks against the polluter.

All in all, this is an essential compilation of flak to watch out for as you battle a polluter. It also has more than 30 hilarious cartoons (for example, three men in suits, two shaking hands, one saying, "Congratulations, Dave! I don't think I've read a more beautifully evasive and subtly misleading public statement in all my years in government.")

No matter what fight you're in, you'll find something useful here. Get: THE POLLUTERS' "SECRET PLAN" (Arlington, VA: CCHW, 1989). Available for \$6.95 (except for businesses, consultants, and agencies, for whom the price is \$99.95 [seriously]) from CCHW, P.O. Box 926, Arlington, VA 22216; phone (703) 276-7070.

--Peter Montague

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