The grass roots environmental movement is engaged in a struggle that cuts to the heart of the American system. The outcome will determine the kind of nation our children inherit. Government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" is threatened by a massive, destructive and unprincipled new industry--the waste haulers. What's at stake is the health and safety of a large portion of the American people, the fiscal soundness of hundreds of local and county governments, and the democratic process itself. Can people REALLY participate in the decisions that affect their lives?

In the fall of 1987, the FORT LAUDERDALE NEWS and SUN SENTINEL put a team of five investigative reporters to work examining the garbage industry in Florida. They found they had to look outside Florida to understand the troubles Floridians are facing. The team examined official records from 22 states and many federal agencies (the Environmental Protection Agency, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Justice Department and the FBI, among others), and during December, 1987, they published a series of 25 articles on the waste industry.

Some of their findings:

** American municipal and county governments are taking on public works projects larger than any that have ever been attempted by local governments before, racking up billions of dollars in public debt, just to manage waste;

** these enormous public works projects are installing unproven technologies that are often poorly designed and poorly built, often dangerously polluting, and always enormously expensive; the projects lock affected governments into a pattern of rising taxation and spending that will hold for the life of the project, usually 25 to 35 years;

** a few enormous garbage haulers, who are increasingly in the landfill business, the incineration business and the recycling business all at the same time, are the sole beneficiaries of this unprecedented outpouring of public funds;

** because modern garbage contains large quantities of dangerous chemicals, what's at stake is not only the fiscal soundness of many local governments but also the health and safety of a large portion of the American public; if the waste industry has its way, whole states will soon be blanketed with garbage-burning furnaces emitting tons of tiny particles of invisible soot carrying toxic chemicals deep into the lungs of the entire population; the residual ash—which is more toxic than the original garbage from which it was derived—will be buried in landfills that are certain to leak eventually, thus threatening many communities' water supplies;

** the "titans of trash" who dominate the waste industry (chiefly Waste Management, Inc., and Browning-Ferris Industries [BFI]) are growing at the rate of 20% each year, thus doubling in size every 3.5 years. Waste Management's gross income shot past the $2 billion mark in 1986; BFI grossed $1.6 billion that year. Their net profits typically range between 20 and 24% each year. The Wall Street Establishment is backing these giants with large infusions of capital, lending them an air of legitimacy that the titans gobble up their smaller competitors (while the Justice Department's antitrust division stands idly by), consolidating control of essential municipal services into the hands of a greedy and unscrupulous few;

** the waste industry has developed a modus operandi based on bribery, pricefixing, political payoffs, back door campaign contributions, the intimidation and suppression of business competition, the distortion and manipulation of technical data, and the systematic violation of environmental laws and regulations;

** the waste industry seeks to counteract its outlaw image by supporting civic projects like art centers; it supports high brow programming on National Public Radio and on public television; and waste executives have begun to sit on the boards of directors of those national environmental organizations that will have them, such as the National Wildlife Federation;

** when regulators take enforcement actions against waste haulers for environmental violations, the companies resist vigorously, preferring to litigate rather than cooperate. As a result, remedies are delayed for years or are forestalled entirely; in the few instances where enforcement actions succeed, the resulting fines are usually small and amount to nothing more than a "license to pollute."

** the waste industry makes a general practise of hiring local political officials as well as state and federal regulatory officials, thus acquiring a stable of political influence and technical know-how that leaves local, state and federal governments lacking sufficient expertise and clout to effectively regulate the industry;

** this "revolving door" syndrome now threatens to weaken even the environmental movement as well-known members of the traditional environmental community go on the payroll and become apologists for the polluters, carrying with them the knowledge and expertise they gained as trusted environmentalists;

** the industry is now dealing with materials that are so toxic that their safe disposal is a matter of major public health concern but governments have become so dependent upon the industry that even when the haulers violate all norms of decency and safety, government cannot bar them from the business because government has no alternate way to manage wastes;

** the waste industry has decided to develop its most dangerous facilities in certain geographic areas, targeting regions of America that are poor and rural, often with large minority populations.

** The struggle to manage waste sensibly and to bring the outlaw waste industry to justice is--in the words of Wendell Paris of Emelle, Alabama (a longtime civil rights activist, now a leader in the movement for environmental justice)--"the moral issue of the '80s."

We will use the NEWS and SUN SENTINEL's series as the starting point for examining WHAT WE MUST DO--a series in which we sketch the broad outlines of a strategy the grass roots environmental movement could adopt to take back America from the polluters. Most of the ideas we will present are not original, but are derived from our friends, colleagues, brothers and sisters across America locked in struggle at the local level with one poisoner or another.

The 25 articles, by David Altaner, Jean Marbella, Jon Marcus, Robert McClure, Rich Pierce, and Fred Schulte, are now available in the RACHEL database; to retrieve the whole series, search on "SUN SENTINEL" in database 7; alternately, send $12 and we'll mail you 85 pages of xeroxed material.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: citizen groups; environmentalists; waste hauling industry; health; organized crime; corruption; investigations; II; msw; epa; sec; doj; bfi; hazardous waste industry; waste treatment technologies; leaks; federal; funding; health; incineration; ash; particulates; landfilling; toxicity; water; groundwater; drinking water; wmi; bfi; antitrust; price fixing; nwf; wildlife; regulations; enforcement; revolving door; wendell paris; emelle, al; al;