Whenever someone proposes a new chemical dump or a new incinerator, or a new gadget to intercept enemy missiles, they try to sell it to us by claiming it is "state of the art." The phrase originated among military contractors who are skilled at finding new words to describe familiar items. For example, military contractors have found that, if they call a hammer a "metallic compression device," they've got a better chance of selling one to the Pentagon for $600. If they call it a "state of the art" metallic compression device, maybe it will bring $800.

Now everyone is selling "state of the art" this and that. For example, Congressman James Florio (D-NJ) introduced a bill into U.S. Congress last week requiring the ash from municipal incinerators to be called 'special waste' (as distinct from hazardous waste), and to be dumped into landfills. And the Congressman's press release called these ash landfills "state of the art" in design.

What does "state of the art" really mean? It just means "the best we can do today." Nothing more.

For citizens looking at some proposal (such as Mr. Florio's landfills), "state of the art" doesn't matter. It is not important whether some project is state of the art. The right question to ask is: "Is it adequate to protect public health and safety?"

If some proposed facility can't protect public health and safety, who cares if it's state of the art? If it's a danger to the community, who cares if it's even if it is state of the art? On the other side of the coin, if some project is adequate to protect public health and safety, who cares if it's "state of the art" or not? If it is adequate, that's sufficient.

Congressman Florio is a longtime friend of the environment. He is intelligent and thoughtful. His voting record is excellent. Mr. Florio was the first person in Congress to use the phrase, "There is no such thing as a secure landfill," so we know he understands all landfills leak. He was the original sponsor of the Superfund law requiring at least $10 billion tax dollars to clean up leaking landfills. But now, for some reason, Mr. Florio has decided to help salvage the municipal incinerator industry, which is choking on its own ash, and he has chosen to do it by promoting "state of the art" landfills.

The ash from municipal incinerators is heavily laced with toxic metals (lead, cadmium, arsenic, etc.) and is therefore dangerous. Incinerator ash is actually more dangerous than the raw garbage from which it was derived. Inside the incinerator, garbage breaks up into tiny particles. The small particles have a large surface area, relative to their volume. Metals collect on the surface of the tiny particles and thus become available to leach out of the ash when the ash is landfilled. Today's ash landfills are tomorrow's superfund sites.

Mr. Florio's "state of the art" ash landfills may be "state of the art" so far as landfill design goes, but, as the Congressman himself has often pointed out, all landfills eventually leak. So ash landfills are not an adequate solution to the problem of incinerator ash. The only adequate solution we know of is: don't make the ash, don't incinerate garbage.

If you want to tell Congressman Florio what you think of his "state of the art" ash landfills, drop him a post card at: The Capitol, Washington, DC 20515; or phone (202) 225-6501.

--Peter Montague

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NOVEL SOLUTION TO SAN DIEGO'S GARBAGE PROBLEMS: SHIP IT TO INDIANS, MEXICO, CHINA, KOREA

A manufacturer of mass burn (garbage) incinerators has proposed a novel solution to the solid waste problem for the city of San Diego, which is California's third largest city (pop. 875,000). Ogden Martin Systems (a mass burn incinerator manufacturer), and Taconic Resources—together calling themselves Recycle 2000—want to collect 1.3 million tons of the city's garbage at curbside, already sorted into two components, recyclable and non-recyclable. The recyclables (bottles, cans, and paper) would be loaded onto ships and exported to Mexico and to Pacific Rim countries (China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan); the non-recyclables (everything else) would be sent by train across the desert to a dump on the Campo Indian reservation. The plan would handle about 80% of the city's garbage.

Last year the San Diego City Council had backed a mass burn incinerator on Kearny Mesa but the plan collapsed when city voters overwhelmingly passed an initiative all but outlawing such plants because of environmental and health considerations. The city's Miramar landfill is expected to be filled by 1995. The plan offered by "Recycle 2000" would extend the life of the Miramar landfill by 25 to 30 years because most of the non-recyclable garbage would end up with the Indians, according to the LOS ANGELES TIMES (May 12, 1988, Part II, p. 3).

The Indians reportedly favor the plan because they would be paid for taking the garbage and they desperately need the income. "It's the worst kind of exploitation," said one observer in San Diego.

Diane Takvorian, Executive Director of the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition, told HWN she fears there's more to it than meets the eye in the "Recycle 2000" proposal. The plan would require authorities to spend $2 million to refurbish an old railroad traversing the desert. Once the railroad is ready, there would be nothing to stop its use for sending part of San Diego's trash past the Campo Indian Reservation out to Imperial County where Ogden-Martin has trash-to-steam proposals pending.

Others in San Diego share Ms. Takvorian's suspicion of the project. They note that the man behind "Recycle 2000" is Richard Chase, who has been pushing a trash-to-steam project in San Marcos. "Ogden is going to get some burning out of this, you wait and see," said a local official who asked not to be named.

For more information, contact Diane Takvorian, Environmental Health Coalition, 1844 Third Ave., San Diego, CA 92101; phone (619) 235-0281.

--Peter Montague