Those who want to build trash-to-steam plants should pick a town with less than 25,000 people where residents are old, poor, politically conservative and Roman Catholic. That is the conclusion of a study commissioned by the California state Waste Management Board, which found people most likely to oppose such facilities are young or middle-aged, college-educated, liberal and Protestant.

The $33,000 study was prepared by Cerrell Associates, a Los Angeles public relations and political consulting firm. The study advises builders of waste incineration plants that they will face less opposition if they put the plants near poor neighborhoods instead of wealthy ones.

"All socioeconomic groupings tend to resent the nearby siting of major (waste disposal) facilities, but the middle and upper socioeconomic strata possess better resources to effectuate their opposition," the report says. "Middle and higher socioeconomic strata neighborhoods should not fall at least within (five miles) of the proposed site."

The report gives personality profiles of the most likely and least likely opponents of waste-to-energy plants, and suggests that trash incineration can be made more palatable by presenting it as part of a recycling program. The report outlines ways to defuse opposition. The report says waste-to-energy plant sites "can be suggested partly on the basis of neighborhoods least likely to express opposition--older, conservative and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Meanwhile the most likely opponents of a waste-to-energy project--residents in the vicinity, liberal, and higher-educated persons--can be targeted in a public participation program and public relations campaign."

The report says the ideal site for a waste-to-energy plant would be in an industrial section far from homes and commercial activity but within the trash collection area that would be served. It says: "Commercial office spaces and residential lands that are at least within visual, hearing or smelling distance of the waste project will likely experience a decline in property values."

Wil Baca, one of the leaders of the California Alliance in Defense of Residential Environments, which opposes trash incineration plants in populated areas, protested that the state Waste Management Board, in commissioning the study, sought to find out how "to deceive [people], to sell them a product they don't want."

It looks to us as if the ideas in this report are being applied across the country. Time after time, we see sites selected where people are poor or rural or both. Fortunately, we also see local people successfully fighting such plans, even making alliances across racial barriers. The fight against mass burn incinerators (and landfills) has become a powerful political force, forging new coalitions, strengthening American democracy in important ways.

The 87-page report, entitled "Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting," was completed four years ago (but only came to light last year when the LOS ANGELES TIMES broke the story); copies may still be available from Cerrell Associates in Los Angeles [phone: (213) 466-3445] or from the California Waste Management Board in Sacramento [phone: (916) 322-3330].

--Peter Montague

MORE HAZARDOUS WASTE BURNERS ARE NOT NEEDED IN THE U.S., SAYS NEW STUDY PREPARED FOR THE EPA

The United States does not need any new commercial hazardous waste incinerators, and will not need any well into the 1990s, according to a new study by a private firm (ICF, Inc., of Fairfax, VA), prepared under contract to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

For the study, ICF collected information from 14 hazardous waste companies (listed below) which, together, operate 83 facilities that handle at least 70% of the commercial waste processed each year in the U.S. The 14 firms said there already exists, or by 1991 will exist, excess commercial incineration capacity.

The 14 companies said they had doubled their own incineration capacity between 1985 and 1987 (from 349,800 wet tons per year to 694,100 wet tons). Even greater capacity increases (doubling or tripling present capacity) is already on the drawing boards for the period 1988 to 1991, the survey found.

In addition, the survey identified a trend: large generators of hazardous wastes are changing to on-site incineration and to on-site waste minimization techniques. More than 90% of hazardous wastes have traditionally been dumped into lagoons and ponds on-site, but new regulations that took effect this year require that lagoons and ponds be lined with impermeable liners--often an expensive (or impossible) proposition. The survey concluded that the future of ponds and lagoons is "bleak."

On-site management of wastes is obviously preferable to sending wastes offsite because the waste generator can control where the wastes go (thus minimizing liability), and wastes managed on-site are easier to protect from the prying eyes of the public and of regulators. Waste sent off-site to commercial facilities must be "manifested" (accompanied by a paper trail showing who sent what much of what where).

The survey revealed many interesting facts about the hazardous waste industry. For example, treatment and disposal facilities operated by the 14 companies received 5.1 million wet tons of wastes in 1987. Of this, 476,000 wet tons was incinerated in 1987 (up 36% from the previous year). The amount landfilled was 2.6 million wet tons, up 5% from 1986.

The 14 firms surveyed were: Chemical Waste Management, Inc. of Oak Brook, IL; Browning-Ferris Industries (BFI)/CECOS International, Inc. (Houston, TX); ChemClear, Inc. of Wayne, PA; Envirite Corp. of Plymouth Meeting, PA; Environmental Services Co. (ENSCO) of Little Rock, AR; Environmental Waste Services of Waterbury, CT; Envirosafe Services of King of Prussia, PA; GSX Corp. of Columbia, SC; Rollins Environmental Services of Wilmington, DE; Ross Incineration Services of Grafton, OH; Safety-Kleen Corp. of Elgin, IL; Systech Corp. of Xenia, OH; U.S. Pollution Control, Inc. (USPCI), of Oklahoma City, OK; and W.J. Lambert/Chemical Resources, Inc., of Tulsa, OK.

The report, titled 1986-1987 SURVEY OF SELECTED FIRMS IN THE COMMERCIAL HAZARDOUS WASTE MANAGEMENT INDUSTRY is available for $30 from Geoffrey Black, ICF, 9300 Lee Highway, Fairfax, VA 22031-1207; phone (703) 934-3304.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: cerrell report; poverty; environmental racism; cerrell associates; siting; incineration; property values;