Recent events forced us to ask, How did we get ourselves into this garbage crisis in the first place and what solutions are available to concerned citizens?

These questions arose because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s General Counsel, Francis Blake, has written a memo arguing that ash from municipal incinerators should be redefined as non-hazardous, so that it can be dumped into ordinary landfills. The nation’s 111 operating municipal incinerators produce about five million tons of ash annually. Numerous studies in recent months have shown that about one-third of this ash is sufficiently toxic to fall within a legal definition of “hazardous waste.”

In July, 1985, the EPA had ruled that incinerator ash is covered by the nation’s hazardous waste laws. Under the 1985 interpretation, if municipal incinerator ash is tested and found to be hazardous, it must be handled as a hazardous waste and the incinerator that produced it must be regulated as a hazardous waste generator. Now the EPA wants to reverse itself, pretending that the hazards of lead, cadmium, and dioxin aren’t real. According to the WALL STREET JOURNAL Oct. 13, a staff member for U.S. Congressman James Florio (D-NJ) calls EPA’s new legal interpretation “just wacky.”

Why is this wacky business happening?

Since World War II, more and more toxic chemicals have been put into consumer products. The basic trend has been to substitute petroleum-based chemicals, many of which happen to be hazardous, for traditional materials. More and more plastics have been substituted for wood, paper and leather; that simple truth captures the essence of the trend. No one with any power has opposed this trend because, traditionally, American government does not interfere with private industrial decisions.

Now, as a result of millions of independent industrial decisions, municipal garbage has become toxic and hazardous. Household products are filled with dangerous chemicals. (As a byproduct of these decisions, workplaces, where hazardous household products are manufactured, have become more dangerous, and the air in peoples’ homes, where hazardous consumer products are used, has become dangerously contaminated.)

For thousands of years, people have thrown their garbage into holes in the ground, which is to say, dumps. In recent decades, we dignified our dumps by calling them landfills. Between 1980 and 1985, the nation woke up to the fact that all landfills leak. Even landfills with double or triple liners, with leak detector systems, with leachate collection systems, and with properly-placed caps—all will eventually leak. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A SECURE LANDFILL.

Realizing this fundamental truth about landfills, citizens pressured government to ban landfilling. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, major corporations (like Westinghouse and Allied Chemical), and the banks that lend them money, thought they saw a business opportunity: they believed municipal garbage incinerators would become a multi-billion dollar business. As a result, hundreds of incinerator projects were started. Today, 210 municipal incinerators are under construction or planned; they are expected to produce 20 to 25 million tons of ash each year.

Now it is apparent that these incinerators reduce the bulk of the garbage but do not reduce its toxicity. In fact, in many cases, toasting the garbage increases its toxicity by creating dangerous dioxins, furans and other organic compounds resulting from the heat. (Even toasting a piece of bread changes its chemical constituents, producing small amounts of cancer-causing chemicals in the badly burned parts.)

There’s no escaping the fact that the dangerous residues from municipal incinerators will have to be put into landfills, which, everyone now knows, will all eventually leak, contaminating the environment. The government is therefore facing an unpleasant choice: force industry to reduce its use of toxic chemicals, or relax the laws and let toxic municipal garbage and ash continue to be dumped into holes in the ground, which will contaminate our drinking water and the general environment.

Forcing industry to use fewer toxic chemicals will bring opposition from industry right now. It may cost some corporations money to change their ways, but even more importantly, it will be portrayed as an unAmerican intrusion of government into private decision-making. Forcing a reduction in the use of toxics materials will diminish corporate contributions to the election campaigns of those politicians leading the fight.

On the other hand, allowing toxic materials to be dumped into the ground will not cause problems immediately. It will be our children who pay for the Superfund sites we create today. Our children will be poisoned, but it won’t happen until some time in the future.

Today’s politicians and today’s corporate executives will have retired by then, so they won’t have to bear responsibility for their weakness or their greed. Thus the Reagan administration, the EPA, and thousands of state and local officials, are eager to dump toxic materials into the environment, rather than confront corporate America to force a reduction in the use of toxic materials. Even the big, traditional environmental groups are unwilling to confront industry on this fundamental issue: social control of industrial decisions. There is only one group of people willing to take this on: members of the affected public who are paying attention, the grass roots environmental movement.

At the grass roots level, citizens have little positive power to force the adoption of sensible technologies. But the movement has great negative power—it is relatively easy to stop bad projects. Grass roots leaders are making an important contribution to America’s well-being by stopping up the pipe. They oppose the dumping of toxic materials in the ground. They oppose dangerous incinerators. Massive local opposition to dangerous disposal technologies will force government and industry to reduce the use of toxic materials because there won’t be any easy place to dump them. And EVERYONE now sees that reducing the use of toxics is the only real, long-term solution to these problems.

--Peter Montague

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