A respected public official in Kentucky--Don Harker, head of the Division of Waste Management--was fired at 4:30 p.m. the day before Thanksgiving. Governor Wallace Wilkinson had ridden into office humming pleasantries about being an environmentalist, but when push came to shove he caved in to threats and blandishments from the shadowy nether world of chemical waste generators and haulers.

Like other southern and border states, Kentucky is under relentless pressure from the waste industry. As wealthy, industrialized states tighten up their own environmental rules, the waste industry has invaded the south and midwest, seeking places to dump poisons from New Jersey and New York and elsewhere. In the south and midwest, where local people are friendly to strangers, the waste industry has proposed hundreds of new dumps and incinerators. Particularly in poor counties where the level of formal education is below average, unemployment is high, and people are generally trusting and open, the waste industry is circling for the kill.

The federal EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) seems actually to be promoting these developments. Region 4 EPA in Atlanta is the weakest branch of that federal agency; Region 4 seems to have abandoned all pretense of protecting the public and is now more or less openly in league with the poisoners. Many state officials recognize what's going on, but few have what it takes to stand in opposition to the waste industry's onslaught. Don Harker has what it takes.

Two kinds of decisions lost Don Harker his job: he opposed the siting of new landfills in inappropriate locations, and he tried to prevent incinerator operators who violated the law from getting permanent licenses to operate.

Those of us interested in protecting the environment can learn some important lessons from Don Harker's courageous work:

1) There are some sites that are entirely inappropriate for landfills of any kind. For example, any site that sits atop fractured bedrock, such as limestone or dolomite or granite, is entirely unsatisfactory for placement of a landfill. The fractures (also called cracks) in such rock formations serve as pipes carrying water. Because the fractures are underground and are not visible, their underground pathways are not known and are not knowable. When contamination from a landfill gets into these fractures, it will be carried away through the system of underground "pipes" (fractures). Whose water supply it gets into these fractures, it will be carried away through the system of underground "pipes." Don Harker knew that excellent basis, Harker's agency denied LWD a permit to continue operating. It was an exemplary performance by a regulatory agency. In Wallace Wilkinson's Kentucky, it was enough to get Don Harker fired.

Don Harker is an outstanding example of what public officials are supposed to be: honest, intelligent, inventive, uncorruptible, and dedicated to protecting the interests of the public. Jean True, vice chair of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, said Don Harker is "the kind of person who didn't knuckle under to industry." Tom FitzGerald, director of the Kentucky Resources Council, said, "I can't think of a more dedicated public servant." U.S. EPA official Hugh Kaufman calls Harker "The best state waste official in the country, a giant among pygmies."

Why not send Governor Wallace Wilkinson your opinion about the firing of Don Harker? Write him at the State Capitol Building, Frankfort, KY 40601. The Governor's phone is (502) 564-2611 and his office fax number is (502) 564-2735.

Send us a stamped, self-addressed envelope and we'll send you a copy of David Miller's testimony on landfill siting over fractured bedrock.

To help Kentucky enter the 20th century, keep in touch with Corinne Whitehead, The Coalition for Health Concern, Box 25, Route 9, Benton, KY 42025-9809; phone (502) 527-1217.

--Peter Montague

Descriptor terms: don harker; ky; wallace wilkinson; waste disposal industry; epa; policies; lwd; aerial photography;