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BOOK REVIEWS

BEYOND DUMPING: NEW STRATEGIES FOR CONTROLLING TOXIC CONTAMINATION

BRUCE PIASECKI, Ed.

Westport: Quorum Books. 1984. Pp. xix, 239. \$35.

This book is a welcome contribution to understanding the fast-growing interest in hazardous wastes policy in America. The generation of these wastes is gigantic in this country, reaching an estimated 245 million tons annually (over 2,000 pounds per capita). The primary means of disposal of such wastes is in "landfills" which historically have often simply been dumps. Present federal regulations require improved landfills but everyone knowledgeable about the matter appears to agree that these, too, will leak eventually in, say, 10 to 30 years. The primary threat hazardous wastes in landfills present is to groundwater, and about 50 percent of the drinking water in the United States is derived from groundwater. Nearly every state has had to close one or more wellfields because of contamination by hazardous materials. But even this is no measure of the potential threat, for such contamination spreads insidiously and very slowly in groundwater, usually not more than a few feet a year.

While large public health effects directly traceable to groundwater contamination have not yet been felt, public concern is justified. Groundwater contamination may well become *the* water issue of the closing half of the 1980s.

The main thesis of this book is that most hazardous wastes should be barred from landfills in the future. Some steps in that direction already have been taken, notably in California. The national Congress is considering legislation which would prohibit hazardous wastes from landfills in a graduated fashion over a period of years. But prohibiting these wastes from landfills is not enough. While doing so might result in efforts to reduce generation, a large residual will nevertheless necessarily remain. Fortunately, there now are treatment technologies available that can recover for reuse or destroy hazardous wastes but these have found only limited application in the United States. In Europe, especially in West Germany, they are applied to a far-reaching extent. While the authors point this out, they do not present as clear a program as one might want on how to remedy the situation in the United States if, as they argue, it needs remedying.

In this respect, it is a shame that their discussion of the foreign experience is so brief. For example, how is it that West Germany was able to site fifteen large, regional, high-tech hazardous waste disposal sites in relatively short order while in the United States we have yet to successfully

establish one? In this connection the experience of the Gulf Coast Waste Disposal Authority is of interest. This respected organization twice, in each case after prolonged and detailed planning, thought it had successfully obtained a site for a high-tech facility but failed at the last moment because intense public opposition developed at the eleventh hour. We get no analysis from the authors of why the situation in the two countries should be so different.

Among the German Lander, Bavaria's system appears the most impressive and would invite an extended discussion and analysis in a book of this nature. In addition to the regional centers scattered around Bavaria, there are numerous local collection centers with limited treatment facilities primarily for neutralization and volume reduction. Generators are responsible for bringing their wastes to the collection points but from there on the regional disposal center handles them, employing many sorts of specialized equipment. The generators pay a fee which is based, in part, upon how readily their wastes can be recovered for reuse. Even hazardous household wastes (pesticides, solvents, paints, etc.) have been successfully collected and treated on an experimental basis. One hopes for legal, economic, political, and technical analysis of this successful effort but, unfortunately, it is not forthcoming.

Another disappointing aspect of the book is the extremely short shrift it gives to illegal dumping. There is one short paragraph about it in the entire book. The scale of the problem is not known, but it clearly exists, and many believe it does so on a large scale. Presumably, incentives for illegal dumping will be even larger when and if hazardous wastes are prohibited from relatively inexpensive landfills and more costly disposal alternatives required. To the extent illegal dumping is a major problem it invites investigation of possible systems of control that do not provide so strong an incentive to do it. One possibility worth thinking about is some type of a deposit-return system. A version of such a system is found in the West German waste oil law. Under it, a fee is levied on petroleum imported into the country and the revenues are used to support a regional system of waste oil collection stations. These collect the oil free of charge and rerefine it or use it for the production of heat. In this system the deposit is the fee on imported oil and the refund is the free waste oil disposal service. Perhaps such a system could be applicable to other hazardous wastes. It bears thinking about.

Another possibly troubling area, mentioned by the authors but about which there is virtually no public information, is on-site disposal of industrial wastes. It is estimated that about 80 percent of such wastes generated are disposed of on the industrial site and such disposal is entirely unregulated. Perhaps regulation is not indicated but it does seem that, at

a minimum, a means should be found to develop public information on the disposal practices that are employed.

I have chosen to emphasize a few weaknesses of the book in this review, trying to highlight areas which have received too little attention in the hazardous waste literature in general. My general evaluation of the book is, however, quite positive. Any reader who is interested in the important problem of hazardous waste in America will benefit greatly from reading it.

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