



Fall 1981

## Who's Poisoning America: Corporate Polluters and Their Victims in the Chemical Age, Ralph Nader, Ronald Brownstein, and John Richard, Eds.

Don Hancock

### Recommended Citation

Don Hancock, *Who's Poisoning America: Corporate Polluters and Their Victims in the Chemical Age*, Ralph Nader, Ronald Brownstein, and John Richard, Eds., 21 NAT. RES. J. 971 (1981).  
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol21/iss4/25>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# **WHO'S POISONING AMERICA: CORPORATE POLLUTERS AND THEIR VICTIMS IN THE CHEMICAL AGE**

By RALPH NADER, RONALD BROWNSTEIN and JOHN RICHARD, Eds.  
San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1981. Pp. 369. \$12.95.

As the title suggests, this book examines the actions of some chemical companies and how their labor practices and waste handling have polluted the environment and damaged public health. At a time when current federal government policy is to lighten regulations over such practices, the book raises profound economic, legal, environmental, and occupational safety and health questions.

Seven different instances of pollution are explored by journalists from the affected local areas. The cases explored are Michigan Chemical's PBB contamination of animal feed in Michigan in the early '70s; Life Science Products' (a subsidiary of Allied Chemical) Kepone poisoning in Virginia in the '70s; Nuclear Fuel Services radioactive contamination of West Valley, New York in the late '60s and early '70s; Reserve Mining's dumping of waste ore into Lake Superior since 1965; the battle over Dow Chemical's 2,3,5-T herbicide use in Humboldt County, California in the '70s; and Hooker Chemical's contamination of the Love Canal area near Niagara Falls, New York beginning in the 1940s.

While each case is unique, in every instance highly toxic chemicals were manufactured by a company and sold to the public, and waste products were dumped into the environment without adequate care in handling and disposal, thereby inflicting serious health damage on workers, people living in nearby areas and, in some cases, on consumers. In all cases the company involved was at least partially aware of the extreme hazards of the material involved before the general public or governmental regulatory agencies began responding to the health impacts resulting from the corporate activities. In most cases legal actions and/or public dissatisfaction resulted in an end to the specific polluting practices, but such sanctions were opposed by the companies, were costly, and only partially successful. Though most of the immediate impacts were terminated and some of the chemicals are no longer manufactured, the long term health effects and environmental impacts remain.

In the concluding chapter, Ralph Nader stresses that the public is not helpless in the face of such corporate action and customary government inaction, because the chemicals and their health impacts can be controlled. Individuals can use care in the products that they buy,

demand stricter regulations of companies' practices, use alternatives to pesticides, and can insist on legal changes. On the legislative front, Nader continues to stress his idea that federal chartering of corporations would require more corporate accountability to their boards of directors and to the public. He also favors imposing criminal penalties on corporate executives who cover up hazards resulting from corporate activities or who are reckless in not supervising subordinates who cover up such hazardous practices.

While not everyone will agree with the solutions suggested, important issues for public debate and decision-making are suggested by this book. Serious chemical contamination has been and is occurring across the United States. Who should bear the costs of clean-up and prevention of such pollution—companies, consumers, governments or future generations? What legal sanctions should be enforced against companies and the executives who (sometimes) knowingly contaminate land, air, and water, causing millions of dollars of damage, including serious illness or loss of life? How much independent testing and regulation should be required before chemicals are allowed to be used by the general public? What recourse should workers contaminated by chemicals have against their company and/or against the government? With the continuing growth of use of chemicals in the United States—production went from 1.3 billion pounds in 1940 to 320 billion pounds in 1978—these issues cannot be ignored.

DON HANCOCK

Southwest Research & Information Center  
Albuquerque, New Mexico