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RACHEL'S HAZARDOUS WASTE NEWS #52

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News and resources for environmental justice.

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PHILADELPHIA TRIES TO SHIP TOXIC ASH TO THE THIRD WORLD, BUT PLAN IS SUNK BY SUPPRESSED EPA DATA

Incinerator problems in Philadelphia foreshadow the future for hundreds of communities across America. The NEW YORK TIMES reported November 15 (pg. 1) that 210 municipal solid waste incinerators are under construction now around the country, with many more to be built in the coming decade. And, said the TIMES, 25 states have petitioned the U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) to have incinerator ash officially declared "non-hazardous" so it can be dumped in municipal landfills and not handled (expensively) as legally-hazardous waste. How the ash is handled--cheaply or expensively--could well determine the viability of municipal incinerator technology. Philadelphia is facing the ash problem squarely now.

Philadelphia has been burning 40% of its trash in two large incinerators since the late-1970s. Initially, the ash was dumped across the Delaware river in the Kinsley landfill in New Jersey. Then New Jersey got smarter about landfill problems and closed Kinsley to Philadelphia's ash in late 1984. Philadelphia sued NJ but lost.

Philadelphia had to--and still has to--find a permanent solution to its ash problem or close down its incinerators. Pennsylvania landfills take some of the ash, but as citizens learn about the toxicity of incinerator ash and about the certainty that landfills will all eventually leak, local fights develop and one dump after another closes its gates to Philadelphia's ash.

In December, 1986, Philadelphia's mayor, Wilson Goode, announced a new plan: a contract had been signed with a Pennsylvania firm, Bulkhandling, to barge a million tons of Philadelphia's ash to the city of Changuinola in the Province of Bocas del Toro in the country of Panama in Central America where it would be mixed with sand and lime to build a highway 30 feet wide, three feet thick, and several hundred miles long. The first year's shipment would be 250,000 tons. Environmentalists raised their

eyebrows at this plan but only one group did anything about it: Greenpeace.

Greenpeace collected reports from the federal EPA showing that Philadelphia's ash contains hazardous levels of lead, cadmium, benzene and dioxin. It fed these reports to the Panamanian government through its embassy in Washington. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in January, 1987, began asking U.S. EPA in Washington whether the rumors were true, that the ash was toxic. EPA in Washington relied on data from EPA Region III in Philadelphia and sent back word, "No problem." But rumors and questions persisted in Panama; in May, 1987, as Greenpeace and friends fanned the flames of doubt, the U.S. Ambassador in Panama wired the U.S. State Department in Washington citing the chilling effect it would have on international relations if Uncle Sam shipped dioxin-laced ash to foreign friends.

Throughout the summer, Panama's interest in the proposal quickened. Then on September 8, one week before the first shipment of ash was scheduled to leave Philadelphia by barge, two Greenpeace activists, Kenn Hollis and Richard Harvey, scaled City Hall in downtown Philadelphia at 2:30 in the morning and hung a huge banner to greet workers as they streamed into center city after sunrise; it said in English, "Don't Export Toxic Ash to Panama," and in Spanish, "Don't Poison Panama." The two were arrested. Simultaneously, Greenpeace provided Panamanian journalists with news that the ash shipment was imminent--something no one in Panama knew. The resulting news stories in Panama raised an immediate outcry. Two days later, Dr. Augustin Luna, a spokesperson for the Panamanian Ministry of Health, told United Press International, "We have given orders to our defense forces that this trash cannot enter the territorial waters of Panama." "Panama won't accept it for the same reason six states in the United States won't accept it," he said.

Now EPA in Washington swung into high gear. A week later, internal documents show, half a dozen branches of EPA hurriedly gathered data on Philadelphia's ash. EPA's Inspector General--the highest investigative authority within the agency--put together a summary report dated October 5, 1987, which said, "Our contacts with [U.S. government] experts confirm that the [Panamanian road-building] project will very likely create serious environmental and human health damage."

The Inspector General's report makes many important points, among them:

** The Pennsylvania firm, Bulkhandling, in concert with a Norwegian shipping firm, has contracted with the Panamanian city, Changuinola, to ship up to 660,000 tons of ash per year for 10 years, for a total of 6.6 million tons of ash. This is more than Philadelphia can produce, so there must be plans for other (undisclosed) cities to ship their ash to Panama.

** Philadelphia's ash is "considerably more toxic than previously publicized" by the regional EPA office in Philadelphia. Region III EPA (in Philadelphia) had suppressed studies of the ash showing its true toxicity. The EPA Inspector General describes in detail the evidence available to Region III, which was never reported to Washington, and concludes, "It is clear from the above results that the actual levels of 2,3,7,8- TCDD [dioxin], as well as the overall dioxin toxicity of the ash, are significantly greater than

previously publicized by Region III." The report makes clear that the regional EPA office, like the city of Philadelphia, had contrived to prevent the Panamanians from understanding what they were getting into.

** Although the ash may not meet the legal definition of hazardous waste, it can nevertheless damage the environment: "And the presence of heavy metals and toxic chemicals, despite being generally below hazardous waste thresholds, nevertheless may cause serious damage if released into the environment," says the Inspector General's report, citing 1800 pounds of arsenic, 4300 pounds of cadmium, and 435,000 pounds of lead in the first year's shipment of 250,000 tons of ash. This is an important admission by a high EPA official and incinerator fighters should note it and quote it.

Not surprisingly, the Panama caper came home to roost in Philadelphia. Local people, who have been complaining about the city's incinerators for nearly a decade, came out fighting: "If it's bad for Panama, what about the people up here?" asked Bill Schwartz, president of the Germany Hill Civic Association. It was not lost on local people that the EPA Inspector General's report revealed the ash contained more dioxin than the soil at Times Beach, Missouri, where the whole town was evacuated in 1983, and that regional EPA officials in Philadelphia had misrepresented the situation. Philadelphia in mid-October had 280,000 tons of ash stored, awaiting final disposal. The city is not close to finding a solution; indeed, there is none in sight.

For the Inspector General's report, write John C. Martin, Inspector General's Office, EPA, 401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20460; phone (202) 382-3137; request a copy of "Flash Report--Philadelphia Incinerator Ash Exports for Panamanian Road Project--Potential Environmental Damage in the Making," dated Oct. 5, 1987.

--Peter Montague, Ph.D.

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[Next issue](#)