Hazardous waste – college

Hazardous waste and its proper disposal have become a major sociological problem today due to its capability of contaminating the area in which we live and its potential to be lethal to all living things. In order for the United States and the rest of the world to save itself from a potentially life threatening problem they must fix the causes which lead to the improper disposal of hazardous wastes and like materials.

Some reasons that hazardous waste has become a problem in the United States today is due to the breakdown in enforcing laws for the proper disposal of such wastes, a lack of initiative on big companies behalf to spend money on proper disposal, and the ease of disposing of such wastes illegally. The mistakes of the past need not be repeated, for hazardous waste can be controlled using methods that prevent damage to human health and the environment. These methods have been neglected in the past primarily because they cost more than indiscriminate or careless dumping, and because no law required their use(Kiefer, 1981, p. 51). The problem of hazardous waste today actually stems from the growth of the United States industry after the Second World War.

However, with the benefits, unavoidably, come hazardous wastes(Kiefer, 1981, p. 9).

Hazardous wastes are the byproducts of everyday industry, ranging from heavy metals like lead, mercury, copper to more dangerous chemicals including cyanide, acids, and synthetic organic compounds. The EPA has established four characteristics that may be used to determine whether or

not a waste should be classified as hazardous: Ignitability, Corrosivity, Ractivity, and Toxicity(Block, 1985, p. 44).

All of these substances and many more are dangerous to wildlife and humans if they are not properly disposed. In 1976 the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act was put into effect by the Environmental Protection Agency. This act requires that hazardous waste be controlled from the time it is produced to its final disposal from cradle-to-grave(Kiefer, 1981, p. 11). However, before RCRA went into effect, about ninety percent of hazardous waste was disposed of by methods that did not protect human health or the environment(Kiefer, 1981, p. 15).

In New Jersey alone 30 percent (120, 000 gallons) of waste is treated or disposed of in 20 licensed New Jersey facilities. The remaining seventy percent (280, 000 gallons) goes to out-of-state facilities or is illegally dumped in New Jersey(Dodd, 1980). One reason behind such methods was that before 1976 there were no laws that required corporations to treat or dispose properly the hazardous wastes that they produced. In the capitalist nation we live in these corporations did not see any incentives to properly disposing of hazardous wastes.

This would take coming up with new processes, building new equipment, and doing a lot of research that would in the end just cost these companies millions of dollars. Such companies found it much easier to dump these poisonous chemicals in the ground or into waterways, thereby washing their hands of the problem. Another method was to hire out midnight-haulers.

These people would load up their trucks with hazardous wastes and while driving let it leak out onto the ground. Another driving force behind the improper disposal of hazardous waste was the Mafia. Organized crime controlled the solid waste disposal industry through the major trade associations, the relevant Teamster locals, and the connivance of political cronies(Block, 1985, p.

102). The Mafia has the ability to buy public officials with ease. This and their scare tactics led many EPA officials to do nothing about the illegal activities that took place. Imagine an EPA inspector or state regulatory agent trying to deal with firms controlled by the members of the most powerful crime syndicates in the country(Block, 1985, p. 103).

All of these reasons led up to the illegal dumping of toxic and or hazardous wastes into the environment. Perhaps the most serious threat to the environment caused by unsound waste disposal practices has been the actual and threatened contamination of groundwater(Block, 1985, p. 51). Its true that well over 150 million Americans depend on groundwater for their everyday lives.

The problem with this is that once groundwater is polluted or contaminated, rehabilitation is almost impossible. A recent government report revealed that private and public water supplies have been contaminated in at least twenty-five states(Block, 1985, p. 51). These poisonous chemicals can accumulate underground and stay in the same locations for lengthy periods of time. These chemicals never evaporating or breaking down from the rays of the sun can possibly accumulate in aquifers for hundreds of thousands of years,

during which time they may continually spoil the groundwater that flows through the area(Block, 1985, p. 53).

The major factor that allows these practices to go on is the failure of enforcement. Government agencies like the EPA are given the authority to investigate hazardous waste dumpers and illegal landfills. However, there are so few regulations on the proper handling of toxic wastes that these toxic waste dumpers have almost an open invitation to continue their practices.

The enforcement record against toxic waste dumpers is not nearly as strong as the enforcement record was against bootlegers during Prohibition.

. . . Enforcement failure occurs for three reasons a regulatory policy of minimal compliance .

. . political and law enforcement corruption and cronyism . . .

and finally, a surprising level of ineptitude which characterizes much of the official intelligence-gathering and investigative processes(Block, 1985, p. 310). This lack of enforcement will potentially allow such practices as illegal dumping to continue unchecked. The ideal solution to hazardous waste problems is to change industrial processes so that hazardous waste materials are no longer produced(Kiefer, 1981, p. 51).

However, in all reality this is very improbable. It would be almost impossible to make any large changes to plants that are already in operation. I believe part of the solution will lie in how the government deals with large corporation pertaining to hazardous waste. If the government were to offer

tax breaks to those companies who properly dispose of their hazardous waste this might inspire companies to do so.

Also, if the government were to offer tax breaks for companies who seek better or more efficient ways of dealing with toxic wastes then not only would we see an improvement in the current situation but most likely a step forward in the right direction of taking care of the hazardous waste problem plaguing the world today. Another possible solution is to have the government fund new projects on how to possibly recycle toxic or hazardous waste in a manner that is safe and productive. One approach to recycling is to transfer one companys waste to another company that can use it. One successful reuse of a waste material involves pickle acid,. .

. The pickle acid is transferred to a power plant that generates electricity with geothermal steam. The iron sulfate in the pickle acid reacts with the hydrogen sulfide found in geothermal steam to form a sludge of iron sulfide and sulfur; this sludge is a valuable addition to some soils (Kiefer, 1981, p. 52, 53).

If a waste can not be recycled in some way then there is the possibility of separating the hazardous materials it contains. These materials can then be individually treated and possibly made harmless.

This process will also help to isolate the hazardous materials and make them easier for concentrated treatments. It is conceivable that we could possibly implement these new plans in order to reduce the amount of toxic waste that is dumped into the environment. The problem with implementing these

types of plans would be the cooperation and expenditure on the behalf of the companies which produce these hazardous byproducts.

If the EPA would make it more favorable for these companies to fall into compliance with environmentally friendly regulations and procedures then we would see a potential immediate improvement in the area of hazardous and toxic wastes. In conclusion, it is not impossible that we can fix our current problems dealing with the proper disposal of toxic and or hazardous waste, it is however very improbable. The willingness of large corporations to make the expenditures that are necessary to solve these problems is very low.

Without a helping hand from the government to offer incentives to these companies and to enforce the current laws which govern toxic waste dumping it will be a long time before we witness any progressive developments on this problem. As for the areas that we have already contaminated with our hazardous wastes there is little hope of ever rejuvenating these sites.

We as a nation must see that by addressing the problems with proper care and disposal of toxic wastes we are in fact saving our own lives. Once we come to this realization we can expect much more pressure by the people for stricter laws and harsher punishments of illegal dumping. Only then will we see a positive change that will affect our future.

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