



Zero Waste Institute

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CHEMICAL DUMPING - A NEW SLANT

I wonder if people realize how the world of excess chemicals really works. Do people know that chemicals reside solidly in the world of ordinary garbage, subject to the same destructive rules, such as allowing anyone who just wants to, for any reason, to decide that any chemical must be discarded. And no one can say “No, I want that chemical, I can use that chemical, don’t throw it away!” The right to create garbage is an absolute in this country.

If your company creates a reusable byproduct in small quantities that have to be saved up before the total can economically be purified, sold, or internally reused, do you think the rules encourage that? Not in this system. If you have an excess of any kind, that is not part of your product mix, then it is denoted by EPA rules as a “waste”. And you can hang on to it for at most three months. If it takes a year before you can reasonably reuse it, too bad.

Discard rules! And how do you suppose dangerous or poisonous chemicals can be thrown away? The rule is to just put it somewhere where no one will be bothered by it. Forget intelligent management – the system runs on fear, loathing and hiding. If there is too much to put into a waterway, then you can drill a hole in the ground and inject it miles underground to undergo unknown reactions far away where no one lives. You can incinerate it or, the most common method, you can bury it in the ground, in a big pit, and cover it with dirt. It’s called a chemical dump.

Which brings us to the main topic today. For several months now, a conflict has been brewing in a small, mostly immigrant town in California called Kettleman Hills. This town hosts a huge chemical dump. Millions of tons of chemicals are sitting underground in unknown piles, covered by dirt. The owner, Chemical Waste Management, is an incredibly profitable and influential company. The dump is slowly filling up and the company has applied to the state for an expansion so that they can continue to profit from wasting. This required a bureaucratic permit, which was immediately granted. But the permit also requires some involvement by the local populace around the dump and they didn’t care for the cozy relationship between the politicians, eager for their campaign contributions, and the dumping company. They point to a run of birth defects and cancers in the town, which should be investigated. They see the presence of the dump as inimical to their health and many think the dump should be closed for good. More are opposed to any expansion of the dump.

The state Health Department listened to the complaints about the birth defects, and told the citizens not to worry any longer. It sounded just normal to them. Everyone has to deal with birth defects, why shouldn't you?

From the Fresno Bee -- State health officials said Tuesday they found nothing unusual about the rate of infant birth defects in an impoverished San Joaquin Valley farm town located next to the West's largest toxic waste dump.

The officials told a packed meeting of the Kings County Board of Supervisors that they had discovered no common cause for the birth abnormalities and facial defects among children in Kettleman City, prompting anguished comments from the audience. Dr. Rick Kreutzer, chief of the department's division of environmental and occupational disease control, presented the results to the Board of Supervisors ... In small towns, "a grouping of birth defects can happen together by chance from time to time," he told the board.

All of this sounds normal to our jaded ears. Starting with the eponymous events at Love Canal, chemicals have been causing cancer and citizens have been protesting for decades now. But something different is going on here that no one is talking about. I know because I watched the sources of chemicals pouring into Kettleman Hills for years and I know a secret that you are not supposed to even suspect.

Most of the chemicals that rush into the dump there, and that generate such toasty profits for chemical dumpers, have no reason to be there. They could be redirected into perfectly normal channels of reuse. They belong in industrial inventories, not in garbage pits. The reasons why they cannot be reused has little to do with their state of nasty contamination but much to do with their regulatory status. Sometimes it is pennies cheaper to discard them than to purify them. Sometimes the regulations absolutely demand, upon pain of gigantic fines, that these chemicals be discarded. Sometimes the owners of the chemicals are not in a position to know of any particular, customized way to deal with their excess chemicals but the dumper is no further than the yellow pages.

Some excess chemicals are created regularly, as byproducts. Many are created by some error, some spill, some inadvertent mixture, some change in orders or some change in a process. All of them, but especially the latter group, require study, time, expertise and research to design a reuse channel for them. Sometimes the way to reuse a byproduct is fairly obvious but subsidized dumping tends, by design, to be cheaper. There are many companies in the reclamation business, who have accumulated expertise over decades. However, every player is subjugated to the vagaries of the 900 pound gorilla in the room – the garbage industry. It is only the garbage companies that can be relied on, in advance, to have a home for absolutely everything. Why? Because they know nothing about anything in particular – not its chemical nature, its economic value, its source or its dangers. Everything has weight and volume and can be settled in the bottom of a pit in the ground. Discard is universal. Reuse takes effort.

So the chemicals will continue to show up at the gate at the Kettleman Hills dump, the surrounding towns will continue to suffer health problems, the permit and regulatory structure will continue to masquerade as responsible management, the dumps and incinerators will grow, and the secret – that it is all so bloody unnecessary, will not even be whispered in the halls of government.

Unnecessary that is, unless you think profiting by wasting the resources of our planet is necessary. Which many, many people in government and industry do.

Do you?

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