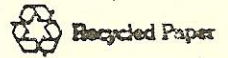


# BETWEEN THE LINES

An issue update from the *Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League*

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## SOLID WASTE LANDFILLS

*It's time to bury the whole idea*

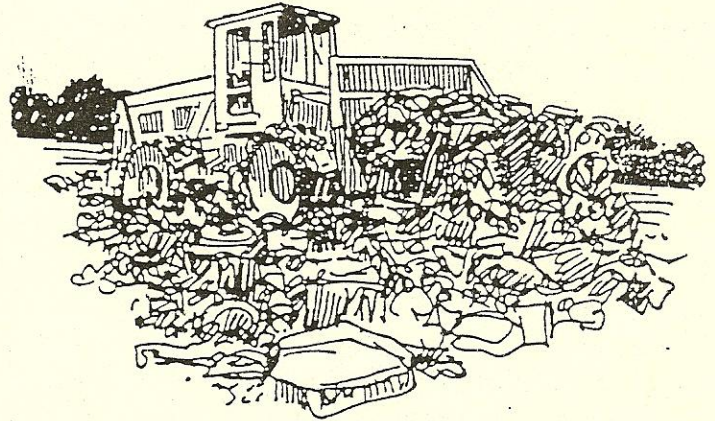
All across the country, county and municipal governments wring their hands over the question, "Where can we put a solid waste landfill (dump)?". Alongside of this are other unwelcome questions: how to pay for it, how long will it last, how to prevent contamination of water, and how to clean up after it. Meanwhile, citizens opposed to landfills ask, "Isn't there a better way?"

### A BLESSING BECOMES A CURSE

Before the advent of modern chemistry, around the time of World War II, trash heaps, waste dumps, and the like were an unpleasant but acceptable part of life on earth. The materials discarded were broken down by natural forces and return to the surrounding environment. But the tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals introduced to make our lives healthier and easier over the last forty years are beginning to have the opposite effect. By continuing to dispose of these substances in holes in the ground we invite the deterioration of the health and well-being of our communities.

### SANITARY LANDFILLS AREN'T

By the 1970's early evidence of the failure of old-style landfills prompted changes in thinking that attempted to alleviate the most noticeable of the problems: rodents, insects, and odors. The so-called "sanitary landfill" was introduced as a solution. Earthen caps re-



duced these problems, but the underground environment introduced a new set of problems. No longer would exposure to the atmosphere allow air breathing bacteria to break down the trash. The lack of oxygen makes anaerobic bacteria thrive. This is the source of explosive build-ups of methane gas. This gas migration has also carried other toxic chemicals such as benzene and toluene to nearby structures.

### ALL LANDFILLS LEAK

Plastic and clay liners introduced at that time were supposed to reduce contamination of water supplies. But recent EPA studies conclude that 80-90% of solid waste landfills definitely contaminate groundwater regardless of liners. The fatal flaw of solid waste landfills is that they are subject to the natural forces that make leakage and contamination inevitable. Rodents can move 5.3 tons of soil to the surface per acre annually. Soil covered plastic caps are subject to erosion and root damage from plants. Buried in landfills

are all the non-toxic and toxic materials produced and then disposed of by households, offices, factories, schools, garages, shopping centers, etc. These materials include aromatic hydrocarbons and halogenated hydrocarbons which, according to plastics manufacturer Phillips Petroleum, "permeate" and "cause stress cracks" in high density polyethylene

(HDPE), the state-of-the-art in landfill liners. Even without accidental releases, the EPA estimates that the best demonstrated available technology (BDAT) will allow leakage of up to 1.0 gallons per acre per day. This means a ten acre landfill could leak 36,500 gallons of leachate in ten years, virtually guaranteeing groundwater contamination.

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## Need Assistance?

Information on problems of waste and inefficiency are being made available by an ongoing *Rural Recycling Project* of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League. We provide speakers, school programs, printed materials, videotapes, and organizational assistance to citizens interested in viable environmental solutions.

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### LANDFILL RULES – NO HELP

State requirements for siting of a landfill comprise less than half a page and are concerned mostly with endangered species, historical sites, parks, and airports. They do little more than prevent wastes from being washed out by a 100 year flood (NCAC .0503).

### PUBLIC VS PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

The technical aspects of solid waste management often overshadow issues of private vs. public sector control. But the loss of control over county waste services and the liability problems of huge regional landfills are major concerns when a county accepts a contract with a private commercial firm. To a private company, an empty landfill is a liability—it makes money only by filling it up. However, a well-run county waste reduction plan and an empty landfill are an asset to the community. This plan need not be more complicated than a county school system. We do not expect a public school to be a profit-making enterprise. The same is true of a county-operated solid waste management and reduction plan with benefits to public health and environmental protection, and long-term reduction of risk to the taxpayer.

### THE NO-LANDFILL OPTION

Sound environmental and economic alternatives are available now. There are fewer and fewer reasons to continue with an outdated method of waste disposal that contaminates air, soil, and water. Davie County NC, adopted a goal of 90-95% waste reduction by 1993. This rural piedmont county has already reduced its solid waste by 52% and may close its landfill. Compare this to the state mandated 25% reduction by 1993.

Many of the hazards associated with sanitary landfills are also reduced or eliminated. And, it has been done by county employees within their regular budget—with no tax increase. A plan for the elimination of landfills includes county-wide recycling services, composting of organic materials including paper, and developing individualized waste reduction programs with industries.

The management of solid waste presents a series of choices to municipal governments, businesses, and residents. Recent public debate has placed the interests of these groups at odds. But some communities are showing that this need not be the case. Solid waste management requires new solutions for the 1990's and beyond.

## BAD BOYS AND CONTRACT CRIME

The commercial waste industry is dominated by two giant corporations: Waste Management Inc. (WMI) and Browning-Ferris Industries (BFI). The record shows that they are among the worst violators of criminal law and environmental regulations in the nation. Examples:

### PRICE-FIXING BY WMI AND BFI

"They are the giants of the garbage industry: WMI of Oak Brook, Illinois and BFI of Houston. In the last year, both waste firms have been accused in civil lawsuits and criminal complaints of price-fixing and other anti-

trust violations. Overall, the two companies have been fined more than \$6.3 million for antitrust violations in Ohio, Georgia, Florida, and New Jersey."

*-Philadelphia Inquirer May 9, 1988*

### CHICAGO BANS WMI AND BFI

"Beginning Wednesday, the city will not send any of its garbage to sites run by giant garbage handler WMI because of an ordinance that prohibits the city from doing business with companies whose officials have been convicted of bribery or bid-rigging...Under the same ordinance the city is now also prohibited from doing business with BFI, the chief competitor of WMI"

*-Chicago Tribune February 1, 1989*

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In municipal landfill leachate:  
32 chemicals cause cancer  
10 cause birth defects  
21 cause genetic damage.

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# NO GARBAGE IN - NO GARBAGE OUT

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# GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION

## *Coopertown, Tennessee*

In 1985 Custom Land Development Inc. purchased a 400-acre farm in rural Coopertown. A landfill operated by BFI was to be built there, but a change in zoning was required. Despite unanimous rejection of the change by the county commission, BFI persisted and got a state permit. They returned to Coopertown with bulldozers, guard dogs, billy-stick wielding guards, and lawyers. Trash was dumped at the site in violation of the county zoning ordinance. The six-year legal fight that followed ended recently with victory for the county aided by a grassroots campaign organized by Concerned Citizens of Robertson County.

## *Pelham, North Carolina*

In 1991, BFI came to Caswell County's Commission with a proposal consisting of free trash disposal for county businesses and a greenbox service in return for a 2,500 ton/day landfill, one hundred times as much as needed in this rural county on the Virginia line. Concerned Citizens of Caswell say, "CCC wants to handle Caswell's waste properly within Caswell (But) we cannot be responsible for this entire region's industrial waste. It

consists of incinerator ash laced with toxic elements such as lead and arsenic, poisonous dioxins and furans, low-level radioactive materials, medical waste, and a stew of whatever drips out of the dumpsters behind a thousand companies."

## *Anson County, North Carolina*

Chambers Development Corporation won approval of the county commission in June 1991 for a 750 ton/day landfill. Conditions of that contract require that the county adopt no zoning or land use ordinances that would limit Chambers in any way, and requires all county waste to go to Chambers' landfill. Citizen opposition is led by Denise Lee, president of CACTUS and community organizer for BREDL. A Chambers official told her that they would come into Anson County and "there's nothing you or anyone can do about it." She replies, "There will be hazardous waste in this landfill, and it will be legal. State and federal standards do not protect us. Chambers is making promises: they'll buy certain properties and leave them to county agencies. I call it buying the county."

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Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, Inc.  
PO Box 88  
Glendale Springs, NC 28629

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(919) 982-2691 Janet Hoyle  
(704) 656-2773 Lou Zeller  
(704) 826-8116 Denise Lee