

Commentary

The Emergence of a National Anti Toxic Chemical Movement

By Ken Geiser

News story after news story reveal the growing awareness of toxic chemical exposure and the terrible consequences of hazardous waste management, from the rural farmlands of Kansas, to suburban Denver and inner-city slums. Groups of community citizens have come together into neighborhood organizations to protest the neglect and irresponsibility of local industries and the inadequacy of government authorities. Throughout the country neighborhood people who only read about Love Canal, Alley of the Drums or Warren County are finding their own lives and health jeopardized by similar conditions in their own local communities.

A broad review of all the various crises suggests something more potent here than simultaneous accidents. Poor handling, use and disposal of toxic and hazardous materials turns out to be much more ubiquitous than initially expected. Throughout the country there is a growing sensitivity to toxic chemical waste and community people are spontaneously reacting by organizing themselves wherever such threats occur. Not only is this response national, it is persistent. Solid organizations are continuing to mature. There are now national conferences, national newsletters and a growing number of training institutes and resource centers for supporting these local efforts. What there is here is more than a collection of events; it is an emerging movement—a nationwide anti-toxic chemical movement.

National, Broad-based, Independent.

This new governmental movement is national, broad-based and independent of both government and industry. First, the movement is nationwide. While Love Canal, suburban and Lowell are all old industrial sites, spontaneous community protest has emerged throughout the country. Since 1980 the Los Angeles based, "Dump-the-Dump Site, Force" has persistently stalled construction of a hazardous waste treatment facility north of the city. In 1981 the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition has been formed south of San Francisco to fight toxic chemical production around high tech industries.

For is the movement confined to cities. Some of the most vocal and frayed reactions have come from sites like Warren County, North Carolina, Lake Charles, Louisiana

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and Hooksett, New Hampshire. In Middleboro, Kentucky, Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens has mobilized hundreds of rural residents against toxic pollution from a local creek. For the past two years Citizens for a Better Environment has been aiding citizens in organizing to stop toxic discharges from Dow Chemical in Midland, Michigan. In rural Massachusetts a broad coalition called Stop It! has formed to resist the construction of a hazardous waste treatment facility in the town of Warren.

From the Bottom-up

Second, the movement is an environmental movement that is based in middle and working class communities. Hazardous waste and toxic materials are particularly prevalent around industrial and agricultural facilities. Environmental advocacy during the 1970's was often pressed by professionals, civic activists, students and scientists. This new movement is bringing forth an environmental consciousness among people who were unlikely to think of themselves as "environmentalists." Because the movement is so tightly rooted in the immediate experience of people's urgency and family life, it has an urgency and a concreteness that is incredibly compelling. For these new "environmentalists" environment is not an abstract concept. It is something which has already exposed them to hazards which are debilitating them and hastening their deaths.

Third, the movement is drawing into serious question the costs and benefits of industrial production and chemical supported agriculture. While much of the early outrage expressed by community groups is focused on the inadequacy of government protections, an experience develops in understanding the full nature of the problem, people come to identify the irresponsibility of corporate decision makers. The arguments of corporate leaders that toxic chemicals are necessary for industrial production or that hazardous wastes are an inevitable by-product of manufacturing pale in the face of citizens concerned about their lives and the health of their families. The old jobs versus environmental

own, it is more the case that they emerge from the growth and maturity of leaders in Single Issue Protest Groups. Awareness of region-wide or state-wide toxic chemical problems leads to a broader set of demands. Achieving dump site clean ups and resisting the siting of hazardous waste treatment facilities or landfills is linked in one strategy rather than seen as competing demands. Inadequate government response is joined by a critical view of the irresponsibility and poor toxic materials management of industrial corporations as the focus of the problems. Tactics are linked to broader strategies and particular events are staged to educate the public as well as to capture media attention.

Coalition Networks. Sometimes directly derived from the growth and development of Multi-Issue Advocacy Groups, Coalition Networks more often emerge from existing regional organizations. Coalitions may be broad in scope and purpose, or more narrow in just linking together the various toxic chemical organizations in a region or state. Right-to-Know coalitions or state Superfund coalitions are examples of Coalition Networks where a particular bill is the focus. VOICE in Ohio or the Delaware Valley Toxics Coalition in Pennsylvania are examples of coalitions linking local organizations together for general support and political leverage. Coalition Networks often focus on key issues that are strategically important for local effectiveness or broader campaigns. Neither government nor industry is seen as simple enemies. More typically the effort focuses on how to make government or industry more accountable and responsible.

The consequences of hazardous and toxic chemical use and misuse will not be easily or quickly resolved. The proliferation of local community groups and the development of coalitions adds up to an emerging movement precisely because there will be no speedy or simple solutions. The conditions for the emergence of a movement are already set. Yet the effectiveness of such a movement remains questionable. There are formidable tasks ahead and some serious debates on programs and strategy. These can be reviewed in terms of needs.

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