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✓ EXPERTS CRITICIZE SUPERFUND

Learning to Live With Toxic Waste

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A growing number of environmental experts, adding a new charge to the criticisms directed at the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund, say that the cleanup of the nation's hazardous waste sites may not be worth completing — and that the public must learn to live with some level of toxic pollution.

"The economic cost of fully carrying out the present Superfund program is far greater than any advance in human health it

would generate," said John C. Topping, a former EPA staff director and president of the Climate Institute, which studies global warming dangers. "You can easily put \$70 million into the ground at one of the (Superfund) sites without yielding any social benefits whatsoever." Topping, who resigned from the EPA in 1986 in protest against inaction on the global warming issue, has since become one of the world's foremost spokesmen for drastic intervention to slow the erosion of the ozone layer.

His views about the multibil-

lion toxic-waste cleanup program are controversial, to say the least, in a country where hazardous wastes have created deep concern since the toxic nightmares at New York's Love Canal and Missouri's Times Beach a decade ago. But they are surprisingly common in conversations with former EPA officials, scientists and even noted environmentalists.

Although these experts agree that Superfund waste sites must be addressed in some way, they

Page A11 Col. 1

Some Experts Say U.S. Must Learn to Live With Pollution

From Page 1

say the government's limited resources may be better spent on other environmental problems that affect far more people, such as indoor pollution or the disappearing ozone layer.

"Everyone I talk to who knows this area well — dozens of people, in and out of the EPA — raises questions about the scientific validity of (the Superfund)," said Stanford Professor Emeritus Thomas Connolly, a chemical engineer. "At a first approximation, the EPA regulations make toxic waste site cleanup 100 times more expensive than public health requires."

Such views are criticized by many environmental organizations, which say they echo claims made by the corporations responsible for the toxic waste dumping. For years, industrial leaders have insisted that the federal cleanup program is a colossal, often fruitless misuse of financial resources.

"This is the line of the manufacturers' groups," said Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, which has

led the fight for toxic cleanup at high-tech firms, which account for most of the 31 Superfund sites in the Bay Area.

"The truth is that they have been caught red-handed with very serious pollution problems — and they know it will be a very expensive proposition cleaning them up."

Many scientists and officials say they are loath to voice their doubts about the Superfund, wary of being identified with such alleged attempts to duck the issues.

"Environmentalism in general — and the toxic waste issue especially — is like apple pie and motherhood today," said an aide to a House natural resources committee who asked not to be named. "Whatever the merits of the case against Superfund, no one can seem to be against the program."

Nevertheless, to many environmental experts, the components of that case have become increasingly difficult to ignore:

■ Projections by government and private researchers place the cost of removing toxic substances at the 10,000 sites identified by the

congressional Office of Technology Assessment as likely Superfund targets at more than \$1 trillion. But that may be only the beginning.

Studies by the Office of Technology Assessment and the General Accounting Office have found that a staggering 425,000 sites nationwide would require some toxic removal to meet current EPA guidelines.

"We have created problems so expensive we will never clean them up," according to Gary Westberg, a Chicago environmental attorney who represents the insurance companies that often have to pay for clean-up.

■ Many analysts question whether the EPA is the appropriate agency to enforce cleanup standards. "My experience is that the EPA is constantly targeting

sites, at enormous cost in dollars and damage to the businesses involved, then changing its mind and dropping them," a veteran Army Corps of Engineers officer said. "The waste is appalling."

One problem that has hampered EPA operations is an extraordinarily high staff turnover rate. A 1989 Rand Corp. study found that the average tenure of project managers at Superfund-related toxic cleanup sites is 18 months. The EPA estimates the typical cleanup time at a minimum of six years.

■ Current legislation is a mandate for "permanent remedies" rather than compromise measures that would still ensure basic protection of public health. The result, says one California Health Department official, "is an emphasis on things like returning groundwater to an utterly pristine condition that lies beyond the reach of

technology today — unless we're willing to undertake a cleanup that will literally stretch over several centuries."

But many environmental groups say such obstacles should not be allowed to slow the cleanup campaign, especially in California.

"We get 50 percent of our water from groundwater here," said Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "In the middle of a drought, our ability to use this supply is extremely important. If contamination spreads — and it is spreading — it's not just a matter of a public health threat. It is also a resources threat."

In response to that argument, other environmental experts ask a different question: Does the program focus — as Congress intended when it created the Superfund in 1980 — on the nation's most hazardous environmental crisis?

"In fact, agricultural and industrial chemicals, the target of toxics regulations, are nowhere near as toxic as the regulations make them out to be," Connolly said.

In the 1970s, sources in the scientific community contend, the public erroneously came to believe that the incidence of all cancers was rising rapidly and that the cause was primarily man-made chemicals. In Connolly's view, "there was and is little scientific basis for either hypothesis."

Said Topping: "Superfund cleanup is economically irrational by any stretch of the imagination. We're piddling away a huge amount of money on Superfund, at sites that altogether probably account for no more than two to three deaths per year. We could confront other pollution problems that are taking thousands of lives every year."