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Hazardous Waste Treatment Council

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HAZARDOUS WASTE TREATMENT COUNCIL

I'd like to begin with the Long Island garbage barge.

FEW ENVIRONMENTAL STORIES IN RECENT MONTHS HAVE GENERATED AS MUCH ATTENTION AS THE FAMOUS LONG ISLAND GARBAGE BARGE AND ITS FUTILE SEARCH FOR A HOME. IT HAS ACHIEVED A SORT OF FOLK STATUS -- A 60 DAY ODYSSEY PUNCTUATED BY A STEADY STREAM OF NEWS REPORTS, JOKES, AND EVEN A SONG.

IT HAS BECOME THIS CERTAINLY BECAME AN EMBARRASSING SITUATION FOR MANY PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY THE RESIDENTS OF ISLIP, LONG ISLAND. YET I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE WHAT GOOD HAS COME OUT OF THIS SITUATION -- INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS ABOUT OUR WASTE TREATMENT PROBLEMS.

THE INTENSITY OF THE PRESS COVERAGE UNDERSCORES AN IMPORTANT FACT: THE PUBLIC SENSITIVITY TO THE WASTE ISSUE IN PARTICULAR, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN GENERAL. WE SHOULD CAPITALIZE ON THIS RENEWED AWARENESS TO STRENGTHEN OUR EFFORTS IN DEALING WITH HAZARDOUS WASTES.
Our first steps toward dealing with hazardous waste began in the latter part of the 1970's. They yielded mixed results.

Congress passed a major hazardous waste treatment law in 1976. Yet it was not until 1980 before the EPA issued its first regulations.

It became evident that while our new law went far, it didn't go far enough. We soon learned that the law contained many loopholes -- too many loopholes. And we had a new Administration that was less inclined to rely on government regulation to confront the problem.

Thus, despite the best intentions of Congress and the people, numerous hazardous waste problems began slipping through the cracks. Some because of flaws in the law, many because of Administration policy or inaction.

The Love Canal scandal thrust the hazardous waste problem onto the front pages. Heightened public awareness and concern resulted in increased pressure for more action.
AND CONGRESS RESPONDED.

In 1984 we adopted new legislation designed to tighten loopholes and get America's hazardous waste programs back on course. Yet to this day there are still glaring inconsistencies in what Congress set out to accomplish and what EPA is doing in the area of hazardous waste management.

For example, as you may recall, EPA proposed to permit some leakage from containment vessels holding hazardous waste. The leakage would be allowed, the EPA figured, if the waste dispersed into the ground at a rate they found "acceptable."

The risk was acceptable, in EPA's view, since concentration levels of these hazardous wastes dropped significantly as they seeped into the ground.

Well, that's crazy. And the Senate and House environment committees felt the same way. We reaffirmed our original intent -- containment of waste with the goal of eliminating these
SUBSTANCES FROM THE ENVIRONMENT. EPA EVENTUALLY COMPLIED.

RECENTLY, HOWEVER, THERE SEEMS TO BE A RENEWED EFFORT TO DILUTE THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR HAZARDOUS WASTE TREATMENT LAWS.

FOR EXAMPLE, EPA IS ALLOWING SURFACE AND GROUNDWATERS TO REMAIN CONTAMINATED RATHER THAN REQUIRING CLEANUP. THIS, TOO, IS POOR POLICY. THESE VITAL WATER SOURCES MUST BE ATTENDED TO AND NOT IGNORED!

EPA HAS BEEN PUSHING TO HAVE COST -- INSTEAD OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS -- BE THE DETERMINATE IN SETTING STANDARDS FOR HAZARDOUS WASTE TREATMENT. UNDER THIS APPROACH OUR FOCUS WOULD SHIFT AWAY FROM WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE -- TO WHAT WE WANT TO SPEND.

THAT'S NOT GOOD POLICY. THAT'S A COP OUT.

EPA IS ALSO SUPPORTING A "PARTIAL CLOSURE" PLAN, WHERE HAZARDOUS WASTE TREATMENT PLANTS THAT POSE A THREAT TO THE ENVIRONMENT WOULD BE ALLOWED
TO REMAIN OPEN WHEN IN FACT THEY SHOULD BE SHUT DOWN. I DISAGREE. THIS IS A HALF BAKED SOLUTION TO A FULL BLOWN PROBLEM.

Even when Congress has been explicit, EPA has looked for ways to side step the issue. Take, for example, standards for the disposal of wastes in land dumps. EPA is proposing to use a different criteria of toxicity than the one used to develop the California List, which is a list developed by California of hazardous substances that cannot be disposed of in land dumps. The EPA proposal would allow a greater number of hazardous wastes be disposed of in land dumps, because their test for toxicity is weaker than California's.

We cannot have weaker enforcement, we need tougher enforcement. Congress must step in and require EPA to take a tougher stance, tougher than the California List standards.

In some instances EPA just does nothing, which is almost as bad as doing the wrong thing. The bottom line is, however, that the will of the people is clear on the issue of hazardous wastes.
THEY WANT SOMETHING DONE, AND THEY WANT YOU AND ME TO DO IT.

ALL THESE ATTEMPTS TO AVOID CONGRESSIONAL INTENT ARE WRONG, AND I INTEND TO FIGHT EACH ONE. WEAKENING OUR ENFORCEMENT IS ONLY SWEEPING THE PROBLEM UNDER THE RUG -- OUT OF SIGHT, BUT NOT OUT OF THE WAY.

WE CANNOT HAVE AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY CONCERNING HAZARDOUS WASTES WITHOUT STRONG CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT. OUR GOAL IS TO HAVE THE COSTS OF DISPOSING OF HAZARDOUS WASTES BECOME PART OF THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS -- AND NOT LEAVE THE PROBLEM FOR ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER GENERATION, ANOTHER CRISIS.

ONLY WITH FIRM, CONSISTENT REVIEW FROM GOVERNMENT WILL A VIABLE WASTE TREATMENT INDUSTRY EMERGE AND OUR AMBITIOUS, BUT ESSENTIAL, GOALS BE ACHIEVED.

I AM ALL FOR A FREE MARKET ECONOMY, BUT HISTORY HAS PROVEN THAT UNLESS GOVERNMENT ACTS, ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS ARE NOT ADDRESSED UNTIL
IT'S TOO LATE. THE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THIS, AND THEY HAVE CALLED ON US IN CONGRESS TO ACT. THEY WANT FULL PROTECTION FROM HAZARDOUS WASTES, NOT HALF PROTECTION.

Now, many fundamental questions remain unanswered: How much hazardous waste exists? How much capacity do we have to treat it?

Which brings me to the most important question. What is Congress going to about all of this?

The answer: continued, forceful vigilance. And a reaffirmation of our purpose -- effective control and elimination of hazardous wastes from our environment.

On June 5th Hazardous Waste Subcommittee will be holding hearings on land disposal bans, and throughout the summer we will look at the broad issues surrounding the question of treatment of hazardous wastes.
But most important, we must drive home to this Administration our commitment to solid, continued, progress on solving the hazardous waste problems.

The law will need reauthorization in 1988. In 1984 we made extensive changes, and it is only fair to give EPA some time to fully implement those changes. It is my hope that we will only need to make minor adjustments to the law in '88, and not get into a major rewrite.

What Congress does, however, will be determined by how well EPA meets the objectives of the law and the goals Congress wants it to achieve.

At the opening of my remarks I mentioned the need for greater awareness. Last year a Roper poll showed that 62% of the population was concerned about contamination of drinking water. 40% expressed concern that contamination was coming from toxic wastes at nearby factories; 38% percent worried about toxic waste from chemical dumps and 38% feared run-off from garbage dumps and landfills.
These numbers prove that people are worried. Your industries represent a solution. We need to get the word out about what can be done now to control, and in many cases eliminate toxic waste. By increasing awareness we can tap into the reservoir of concern that the Roper numbers indicate. The time is ripe to catch the attention of the American people and give new momentum to our efforts.

Maybe that garbage barge has come at the right time. The name of the barge's tug -- Break of Dawn -- may be fortuitous. I'd like to think this unfortunate event represents the dawning of a new awareness about hazardous waste. We should turn it to our advantage, and together keep the pressure on.

Thank you very much!