

Features

Abandoned sites overflowing with PCB's

Old chemical dumps resurfacing

United Press International
HOUSTON — Twenty miles from Houston's glittering skyline, in a remote area near the San Jacinto River, two old chemical waste dumps filled with byproducts of the industry that fueled the city's growth lie bubbling in the sun.

The Environmental Protection Agency discovered French Limited and Sikes Pit, hidden in wooded areas on either side of U.S. 90, during a search-and-inspect program begun in 1980 under the 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act.

The EPA lists the sites as orphans, filled to overflowing with poisonous waste and abandoned. The EPA still has at least 636 chemical waste sites to reckon with in Texas and officials say more orphans likely will be found.

The orphans are mistakes of a lengthy past, and the EPA's five-year-old "cradle to grave" hazardous waste management plan is intended to provide for them. The two-pronged attack is aimed at cleaning up old, unsafe sites and controlling new wastes.

But funds to pay for the estimated \$44 billion national clean-up bill are barely trickling in. The federal clean-up "superfund," financed by special taxes on industry, amounts to a mere \$1.6 billion.

Moreover, citizens in many communities, including some supported by the petrochemical industry, are fighting the locating near them of purportedly safe waste disposal facilities designed to eliminate the problem forever.

Many residents do not see the old waste dumps as a problem.

Lee Hammond, his wife and six children have lived between Sikes Pit and French Limited, about a half mile from each, for 20 years. He said he remembered chemical tank trucks come to dump their loads at night, but he never gave it much thought: "You kind of get used to the smell after a while."

waste handling is similar to throwing away food. "If the toast cost you a penny and you burned it, you threw it in the wastebasket," he said. "If it costs you a buck, you're quite likely to scrape the carbon off and eat the toast."

But bad management is no piece of toast. The EPA equates inefficiency with ecological disaster.

wastes and has criticized industry for dragging its feet.

"Although techniques exist for environmentally sound management, they have not been widely used because of their higher cost and because there was no legal requirement for them," a 1980 EPA information brochure reported.

But Shell Oil Co.'s environmental safety chief, R. D. Mullineaux, said the economics of waste disposal actually have spurred the use of improved technology in the last eight years.

Mullineaux guesses new technology may reduce the amount of hazardous waste generated by 25 percent, eventually almost eliminating the problem.

"The economics have changed drastically since 1973," Mullineaux said. "Oil prices have gone up by a factor of ten so the value of the good parts of the waste (the parts that can be recycled or otherwise used) has gone up dramatically and it pays to get the waste out of it."

Mullineaux said useful chemicals once thrown out as waste now can be removed by improved separation techniques and high-temperature incinerators virtually destroy potential hazards while providing a source of energy.

Mullineaux said most of what used to be thrown out as waste can now be recycled, and inefficient

The number of potentially hazardous sites changes as some facilities are cleared and others are added, but the list is growing.

Last December, the EPA listed 538 potentially hazardous sites in Texas. Two months later, there were 547 and by June, 1981 the number had grown to 636. In the same period, 41 Texas sites were cleared.

French Limited, identified in August 1980, has fared better than other orphans. Funds were appropriated for its clean-up shortly after it was found, and work began in September 1980.

"Everytime it rained, the pond would overflow its banks and the chemicals would run down to the river," said Al Anderson, a

cleanup worker at the site. "We rebuilt the dike and put some of the contaminated stuff back into the pit."

EPA tests found polychlorinated biphenyls, commonly known as PCBs, in alarming concentrations outside the pit. PCBs are suspected carcinogens and their manufacture and use, except in sealed systems such as high-voltage electrical transformers, were banned by the federal government in 1979.

Kut Rite Environmental Services did the clean up job at French Pit, and company presi-

dent C.M. Wright said money ran out before the job was finished.

The initial work — diking the pit and pumping and shoveling 2,100 cubic yards of PCB contaminated material back into it — cost \$750,000 and took ten months, he said. Another \$150,000 is needed to contain the rest of the contaminated material, Wright said. But the work at Sikes Pit, just across U.S. 90 from French Limited and a half mile closer to the San Jacinto River, cannot even begin until funds become available.

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