

Preface

Early in the 1970s two significant events occurred: the Environmental Protection Agency was established and Times Beach, Missouri was sprayed with dioxin-contaminated oil. Thirteen years later, we are dealing with a public health problem of national magnitude involving both of these events. This conference, held on December 9, 1983 at St. Louis University attempted to trace the development of this problem and identify the lessons learned from the Missouri experience.

It is undeniable that significant progress has been made in cleaning up air and water pollution. Government and industry spent about \$50 billion per year dealing with toxic waste. Some estimates predict that the government will need to spend \$690 billion during the 1980s to clean up pollution. Besides the financial magnitude of this problem, the sheer tonnage of toxic waste produced in this country is remarkable. Approximately 40 to 60 million tons of toxic waste are produced each year. The EPA reports that some 80,000 pits and lagoons hold toxic waste and these have contaminated the ground water in many cases. Only 418 of the worst chemical dumps have been identified by the EPA for clean-up, mainly because the cost is so great and manpower is limited (Taylor R: Cleaner air and water. U.S. News and World Report, February 28, 1983, pp 27-28).

Much debate has already occurred over the best solution to this problem. It was decided to buy out Times Beach while other areas were designated for clean-up. Even those who advocate clean-up are at odds over the most cost-effective method and what levels can be realistically achieved.

Clearly, the best solution lies in preventing further contamination of our environment in the future. Easily accessible low-cost dump sites are only a temporary solution. Stepping up regulatory efforts would help assure that no items would be "lost" and ultimately contaminate a wide area such as Times Beach. The development and refinement of recycling of degradation technology is vital to preventing such disasters from occurring in the future. Dumping is merely a short-term solution to a problem where definitive solutions are needed soon. Only by actively developing and employing such preventive measures can we stop repeating these national tragedies. As shown by the Times Beach incident, a little toxic waste can go a long way.

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