

Toxic wastes: They're slowly poisoning America

National Geographic News Service

WASHINGTON — Into the land it goes, millions of metric tons of it a year. Cyanide, pesticides, toxic PCBs, paint sludge, raw materials for varnish, carpets, and detergents, and more—all constituting what's come to be known as "hazardous waste."

It's disposed of in pits, ponds, deep wells, and landfills, threatening America's groundwater. It's injected between rock layers, or illegally sprayed on ordinary trash, compacted, and sent undetected to city landfills. Sham recyclers even water down heating fuel with liquid toxic waste for resale.

No one knows the true sum of the nation's hazardous waste, but the 264 million metric tons regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1981 would fill the New Orleans Superdome almost 1,500 over. Since 1950, Americans have disposed of possibly 6 billion tons in or on the land, writes Allen A. Boraiko in a comprehensive roundup of the nation's hazardous wastes problem, in the March National Geographic.

THOUSANDS OF SITES

By last October, EPA had designated or proposed 786 waste sites for a cleanup list, but the agency estimates the list may eventually grow to 2,500 sites. The congressional Office of Technology

Assessment estimated in March that 10,000 or more dumps will end up on the list at an eventual cleanup cost of more than \$100 billion.

The buildup of waste has steadily increased citizens' exposure to chemicals that can cause cancer, birth defects, miscarriages, nervous disorders, blood diseases, and damage to liver, kidneys, or genes.

Hazardous waste can be as ordinary as the mercury in an exhausted watch battery or the butane residue in a disposable cigarette lighter, a few drops of lye in an "empty" can of oven cleaner,

or the toxic PCBs in an old TV set.

On a larger scale, a million gallons of oil muck laced with PCBs—once commonly used in industry—were found at the huge hazardous-waste dump near Swartz Creek, Mich. So far 120,000 tons of waste and contaminated soil from the site have been reburied elsewhere, and the cleanup is not complete.

Some progress is occurring. Under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), passed by Congress in 1976, some hazardous waste is monitored and regulated. The Superfund, created to clean up some of the nation's

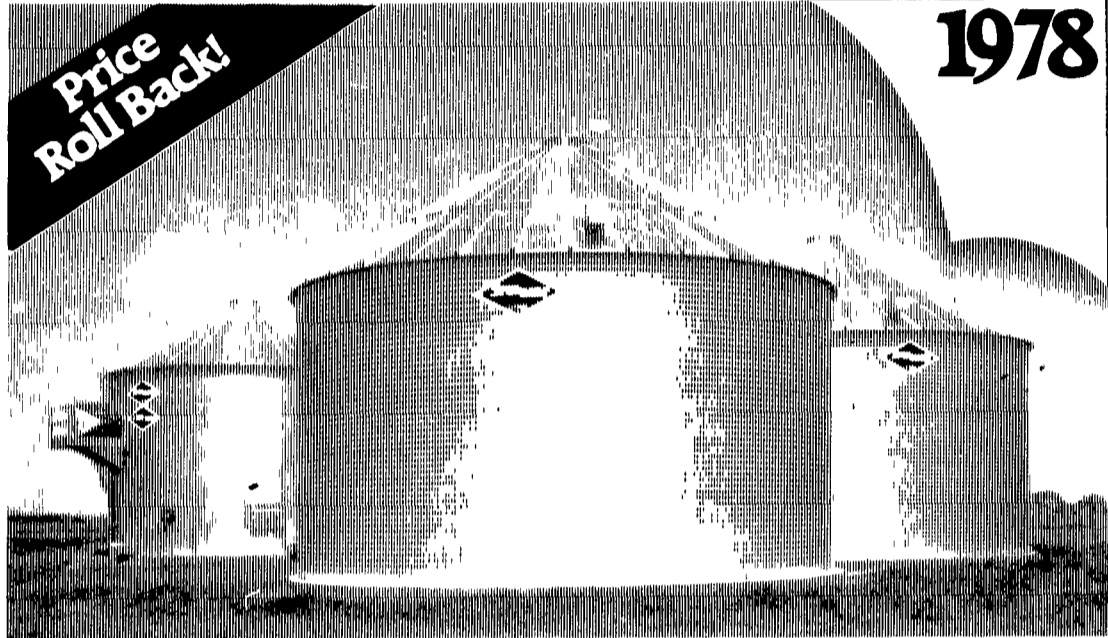
worst dumps, is about to be renewed and may expand to more than \$10 billion. Environmental groups and chemical companies have formed a nonprofit corporation—Clean Sites Inc.—to aid cleanup of at least 20 dump sites.

But vast amounts of toxic waste still go unregulated. For example, EPA annually exempts an estimated 5 million tons of industrial wastes discharged as domestic sewage, including most of the metal-finishing industry's toxic metal dregs.

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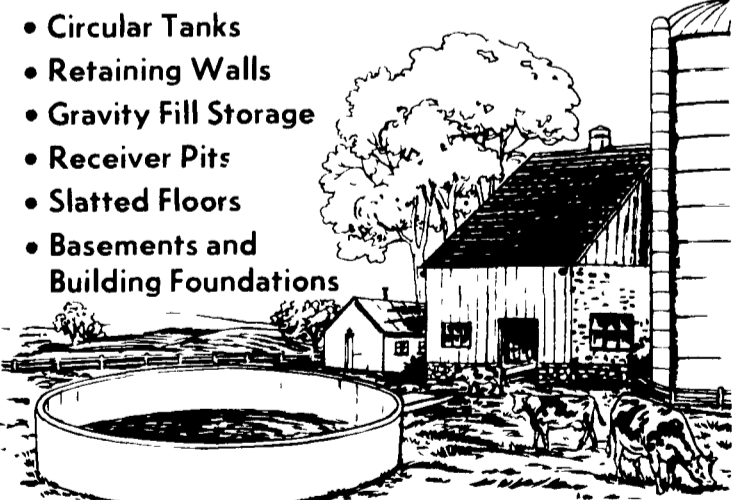
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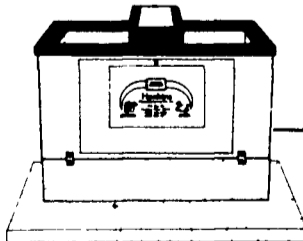
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