

# Buried bomb:

## A bill of prevention won't expunge contamination

Second of two parts  
By TOM LONERGAN

Michigan has unknown quantities of poisonous wastes buried throughout the state that could potentially contaminate drinking water.

It also has a new hazardous waste disposal law.

While the latter might appear to be a solution to the former, it isn't.

"The law (which took effect Jan. 1) is intended to be a preventive measure," a representative of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) said recently.

"It's not a measure to clean up those problems."



REP. ALICE TOMBOULION  
"Cooperation from all"

"THOSE PROBLEMS" include nearly 650 known and suspected chemical dumps statewide and another 50,000 potential waste hazards identified by the DNR last month.

The list included 36 polluted groundwater sites in southeast Michigan, and it labeled Oakland County as among the three worst contaminated counties in the state.

While the new law doesn't address problems related to chemicals and other hazardous wastes now in the ground, environmentalists hope it will prevent future toxic materials from getting there in the first place.

"There has not been a clear-cut way for anyone on where to send hazardous waste or how to dispose of it," said state Rep. Alice Tomboulion, D-Oakland Township, who sponsored the new law passed last year by the legislature.

The situation has led to what could be a time bomb of chemical contamination problems for the state, said one state environmentalist.

"We've just got thousands of sites around the state that have been potentially disposed or storage areas of chemicals in the past," said Jeff Dauphin, of the West Michigan Environmental Action Council.

The new law, he said, should allow the state to "get control of the problem but it's not going to solve the problems of the past."

The "Hazardous Waste Management Act," as it's formally titled, will regulate all aspects of the handling of toxic wastes, licensing not only the people who create the wastes but also those who transport, store or dispose of them.

"THE REAL focus here is to reduce the amount of waste generated," said Paul Tomboulion, coordinator of Environmental Studies at Oakland University.

*"There has not been a clear-cut way for anyone on where to send hazardous waste or how to dispose of it."*

— Alice Tomboulion,  
State representative

ALTHOUGH IT may take some time before the law is fully known and enforced, Mrs. Tomboulion believes "most companies will try to follow what's set up."

"The cooperation of all the different aspects of industry (when the proposed law was pending in the legislature) illustrates their concern," she said.

Dauphin said, "It's going to take a while before all that (new rules and regulations) settles and the private sector has a handle on what the rules of the game are."

"Because we still generate hazardous waste at a heavy rate," Dauphin continued, "it's going to take at least two to five years before we really get

in gear to deal with all aspects of hazardous waste.

"One of the things we're dealing with is the enormous array of materials that are termed hazardous."

Part of the DNR's rule-making process is to define what a hazardous waste is.

DAUPHIN SAID the new law "has overwhelming support from private business, government and environmentalists."

That might lead one to believe it's watered down and compromised, but that's not the case at all, he said.

For now, however, Dauphin does not believe DNR has adequate staff to enforce the new law. And he doesn't expect benefits until the permanent rules are in place.

For the state fiscal year that began last Oct. 1, \$1.2 million has been allocated to the DNR to enforce the new law, said Gary Gunther of the department's environmental services division. Funding must be renewed through the legislature each year, he added.

For Gunther and the DNR, the law means more work.

"The initial workload will be, we think, horrendous," he said.

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