

Toxic waste cleanup will be slow

By Penny Wright
special writer

Sporting a maize-colored tie and a "Mister Clean" smile, William D. Ruckelshaus, head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, breezed into southeastern Michigan this week with a message:

The United States is dealing with problems of the environment in an orderly and forthright manner — be patient.

"We are in the very early stages as a country in deciding what to do about hazardous waste," Ruckelshaus told a conference in Southgate Monday on "Alternatives to Landfills."

"Society has paid very little attention to dealing with hazardous waste from literally the dawn of industrial civilization," Ruckelshaus said in an appraisal of where the nation stands in solving waste problems.

PROGRESS HAS been achieved, the EPA chief said, in the area of non-toxic solid waste disposal. When the Indiana-born lawyer first headed EPA 10 years ago under President Nixon, programs on solid waste were all focused at the national level. Since then, the federal government has pulled back from direct involvement in the decision-making process.

"That can be done about solid waste is often a local question," said Ruckelshaus. "The choices have to be tailored to problems that exist at a local level."

The EPA chief admitted that after a decade absence, he is struck by the toughness of controlling hazardous waste. "It's difficult to arrive at a judgment of precisely what ought to be done," he said.

Ruckelshaus was a vice president for law and corporate affairs for Weyerhaeuser Co., Tacoma, Wash., a paper manufacturer, until last year. He was recalled to government service by President Reagan after Anne Gorsuch had been forced to resign during a flap over the so-called EPA "Superfund."

LOCAL REACTIONS to his speech were positive. Wayne County Planning Commissioner Maurice

Roach of Plymouth said he hoped the Ruckelshaus visit would underline the importance of the proposed Wayne County Solid Waste Management Plan, currently receiving public review.

"Ruckelshaus said said things (about waste disposal) that needed to be said," Roach added. Pam French, former EPA and president of Concern Detroit Inc., conference sponsor, hoped the "recycled" EPA head would spark more public interest in waste disposal than his predecessor, the "Ice Queen."

CURRENTLY, Ruckelshaus said, EPA uses two main tools for grappling with hazardous waste problems:

- The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).
- The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act — alias "Superfund."

He said EPA is in the early stages of implementing RCRA that pertain to hazardous waste use. While the agency has yet to define hazardous waste as opposed to other wastes, attempts are being made to monitor dangerous substances.

A nationwide "radio to grave" tracking system is moving into place to monitor the movement of hazardous waste from production to disposal, but Ruckelshaus cautioned, "It isn't going to happen overnight."

PROGRESS in implementing Superfund is equally slow, Ruckelshaus said.

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With \$1.6 billion, Superfund gives the EPA authority to handle cleanup of old and abandoned waste sites that pose a public health threat.

He closed on a note of optimism: "We discovered these problems late, but we have now unquestionably made the commitment to deal with hazardous waste, and we have the government programs in place to deal with them."

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