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Environmental Protection Agency
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EPA's Hazardous Waste Ground Water Task Force

Introduction

Until recently, the purity and availability of ground water were taken for granted. But that assumption has been shaken by recent discoveries of serious ground-water contamination. At the same time, the nation's consumption of ground water has been increasing. Already, half of all Americans get their drinking water from ground-water sources, and this percentage is growing. Many communities simply cannot exist without it.

Ground-water contamination occurs when wastes and other unwanted materials seep through the soil into aquifers, invisibly polluting water supplies. One major potential source of this contamination is hazardous waste land disposal facilities. Under authority of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency since 1980 has required such facilities to monitor their sites for evidence of ground-water contamination. But recent EPA studies show that many of them have not complied effectively with the requirement. Non-compliance not only makes it difficult to ensure that facilities are performing properly, but also limits the facilities' usefulness as depositories for wastes taken from Superfund sites.

Task Force Project

Because of these findings, EPA and the states have substantially stepped up inspection and enforcement efforts. In addition, EPA has created a special task force to investigate the adequacy of groundwater monitoring at the 58 commercial facilities around the country that dispose of hazardous wastes on land. Task force members include personnel from EPA headquarters and regional offices, the States, and EPA's National Enforcement Investigations Center. The task force has two major goals: o to determine whether regulated facilities are meeting RCRA requirements to protect ground water from contamination by hazardous materials, including wastes from Superfund sites; and o to identify and evaluate any causes of poor compliance and recommend solutions.

To determine the extent of facility compliance with ground-water monitoring requirements, and to identify potential ground-water contamination, task force members will first review existing site information, including evidence derived from permit applications, monitoring data, local geological studies, and any prior enforcement actions. This first review is intended to spotlight any managerial, operational, or design shortcomings that suggest probable noncompliance and/or ground-water contamination. Task Force members will also conduct onsite inspections and sampling to confirm potential problems and fill in information gaps.

Facilities not meeting the requirements will be subject to enforcement orders, permit conditions, or other administrative actions to bring them into compliance. The review process for any given facility is expected to take several months. The entire project likely will extend through 1986.

Of the 58 commercial facilities to be evaluated, the task force will focus first on those already undergoing significant state or EPA review, and on large, multi-waste facilities that have received Superfund wastes.

Although on-site facilities also can cause ground-water problems, the task force is reviewing commercial facilities first because they receive, or may receive Superfund wastes, and the agency is continually making decisions about their use for that purpose.

Normal state and EPA regional oversight of the 58 commercial facilities will continue during the task force investigations. Many of the facilities already are under orders to improve their monitoring systems, and if any evidence of ground-water contamination turns up during a review, the task force will provide that evidence to the appropriate EPA enforcement office for action against the facility operators.

Improving Compliance

In addition to identifying any facilities that may not be complying with requirements for ground-water monitoring and protection, the

other major goal of the task force is to identify the causes of poor compliance and recommend solutions. In addition to physical and operational deficiencies, problems potentially include shortcomings in the guidance available both for facility operators and enforcement personnel; inadequate training programs; and the way in which parts of the regulations themselves are written.

EPA and the states already are using additional inspectors to reinforce their ground-water enforcement efforts; the task force project is expected to speed up the improvement process and ensure a consistent nationwide focus. It also will help determine where Superfund wastes should go and under what conditions.

For More Information

EPA Regional Offices can answer your questions about the task force and its activities.

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