



# Ecology Launches Effort to Implement New Toxics Cleanup Law

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Hazardous chemicals have been dumped on and into the ground at hundreds of sites throughout Washington. Some chemicals have seeped into nearby wells causing health concerns.

Early attempts by state and local government to identify and clean up these sites frequently were hampered by lack of funds and legal authority.

But now, armed with revenues from a toxic substances tax and a comprehensive enforcement law, state and local governments, including the Department of Ecology, have begun the long process of eliminating these environmental hazards. We have the basic tools and we certainly have the backing of the public to do this cleanup. We are approaching this problem in two ways:

- ❖ We are determined to halt the creation of any new hazardous waste problems through stringent regulation of contaminant sources and strong efforts to encourage waste reduction and recycling.

- ❖ We are committed to clean up existing sites in a speedy but orderly and cost-effective manner.

Initiative 97, the Model Toxics Control Act, was passed by voters in November, 1988. The new law became effective in March, 1989, but the real launch of its programs began with the state's new fiscal year, July 1, 1989.

The new law is a vehicle for cleaning up problems caused by inappropriate past practices. As much as possible, it uses the resources of the people who caused the problem. Companies or individuals who dumped the wastes are responsible for cleaning them up. Where no private resources are

available for cleanup, there are funds available from the tax on toxic substances. In addition, grants from this tax help local government pick up its fair share.

This first year's activities will include:

- ❖ Issuing the rules needed to implement the act.

- ❖ Continuing the process of investigating and cleaning up specific sites.

- ❖ Improving public education and involvement efforts on cleanup activities.

- ❖ Promoting the reduction of hazardous waste produced and the recycling of hazardous wastes.

- ❖ Establishing a contaminated site ranking system which will set cleanup priorities according to the risks to public health and the environment.

Sometimes I'm asked why cleanups take so long and why all sites aren't being actively pursued. Of the 250 confirmed sites, roughly half are being actively addressed this year and beyond. We are making progress in cleaning up many smaller sites such as leaking underground fuel storage tanks. Larger sites are taking more time.

Sometimes records are not complete or multiple sites may exist in the same area. Sometimes it is difficult to determine what chemicals we are dealing with or the source of contamination.

We must do careful, thorough studies at each site to determine the extent of contamination and the right cleanup methods. Without proper planning, a cleanup can result in costly mistakes.

Our comprehensive cleanup effort has not been underway for very long. In the last five years considerable time and resources have gone to studying major sites. Now

we are in the design phase — developing with the site owners the best methods for cleanup.

The next two years will be years of transition. We will have developed the rules for the cleanup effort and moved from study to actual cleanup, while encouraging public understanding and help.

We know it will be decades before all our sites are cleaned up. Removing contaminants from groundwater takes time with current technologies. A finite amount of money is available to complete necessary studies and design. But we are determined there will be a time when we work ourselves out of the cleanup job.

To do this, however, we will have to make sure no new hazardous waste sites are being created. Waste reduction and prevention are our top priorities and they should be the top priorities of hazardous waste generators as well.

For example, Ecology staff recently estimated that cleanup of a hazardous waste landfill near Spokane will cost \$14 million. If the landfill owners had chosen instead to properly dispose of hazardous wastes, their cost would have only been about \$410,000. This should encourage anyone to look toward waste reduction and recycling and, when necessary, proper disposal.

This issue of Baseline describes our hazardous waste cleanup efforts. We welcome your comments or suggestions. □

## **BASELINE**

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