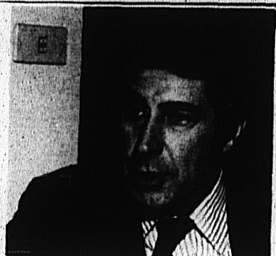


Dateline

Washington

A weekly column

by Sen. Mike Gravel



Solid Waste Disposal Act

The Solid Waste Utilization Act of 1976, which has now passed the Senate, could have real significance in helping Alaska deal with its problems of garbage.

Trash left behind over decades of use by the federal government will be specifically studied as to methods for getting rid of it and the costs involved.

This debris, 55-gallon oil cans, wrecked buildings and other trash that has littered Alaska's beautiful landscape from the Arctic coast to the Aleutian Islands, will be studied to determine how best to remove it. A report will be made to Congress within a year of enactment of the legislation.

The Senate Public Works Committee, in writing the bill, agreed to my amendment to direct a study of the cleanup of these federal sites—Petroleum Reserve Number Four on the North Slope, the Defense Early Warning System (DEW Line) established by the Air Force across the Arctic cap, and the World War II debris strewn over the Aleutian Chain from the Japanese invasion and occupation.

While the World War II debris is potentially hazardous with unexploded ordnance, bombs, mortar shells and other articles of war, the materials may also have historical value.

It is my hope that in sorting through the debris during this study, the federal agencies involved will work closely with state and Native groups in determining what should be removed and the most environmentally sound method of removal.

There may be an interest in preserving some of the material, such as the site of the Battle of Attu Island, which might have historic as well as archeological and cultural significance. These are elements which should be considered in the study.

Other debris left from federal use of Alaska has considerably less historic value and can be classified only as garbage. However, because of the distance and isolation of some of these sites, there has been no major effort to remove the debris left from decades of federal use.

I was able to get a provision written into the bill during the committee sessions to require federal agencies operating in a state to comply with state regulations regarding solid waste disposal. This would assure that any future activities in Alaska by federal agencies will be subject to state regulations. Once we get the federal sites cleaned up, we will be able to safeguard against these littering problems in the future.

The legislation, in general, would have far reaching effects on the environment, public health and the economy, but places the regulatory responsibility with the states.

The bill would prohibit open dumping and open burning of municipal waste, effective when the state has adopted a waste management program. Getting rid of municipal waste has been a major problem and expense to large and medium-sized cities.

The municipalities would have the authority and the assistance they need to try some new and innovative methods of getting rid of this garbage.

The heads of federal agencies could make federal lands available to municipalities for waste management programs if these lands are necessary for compliance with the ban on open dumping.

The legislation also regulates hazardous waste disposal. It gives states with approved permit programs the authority to grant permits for disposal of hazardous wastes without the general approval each time by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Landfills have been used in some areas of Alaska for disposal of solid waste. This has presented a problem in areas with permafrost conditions. Also, in Southeastern Alaska there is a lack of land for disposal use. The funds provided under the bill, would allow the state and rural communities, those of 5000 or fewer, to look for alternative methods of waste disposal.

Incinerating debris gets to be a problem in many of the rural communities, but under the new bill, funds would be available for construction of facilities for waste disposal. With Alaska at the end of the supply line, goods that were expensive to begin with because of the shipping costs, becomes expensive trash when discarded.

The legislation provides funds to assist states and rural communities in planning solid waste management systems. The rural communities would be able to use the federal money to help in construction of the trash disposal systems.

The legislation also provides for loan guarantees to develop demonstration facilities for resource recovery and resource conservation. This will be an opportunity to attempt to limit the amount of waste materials by developing new ways to use the recovered resources.

These guaranteed loans would be available for commercial, individual, institutional or corporate efforts toward reuse of recovered resources.

One of the ways of dealing with the solid waste problems is to encourage the reduction of unnecessary use of materials and the reuse of products to conserve our natural resources which are finite.