

Cleaning up toxic waste costly to communities

Officials say prevention is cheaper

by Alexandra J. McClanahan
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JUNEAU — Communities may avoid dealing with toxic waste disposal today, but they will later get stuck with cleaning up the mess, which is many times more costly, a spokeswoman for the National League of Cities told the Alaska Municipal League recently.

Carol Kocheisen, legislative counsel for the Washington, D.C., based league, cautioned community leaders that local governments may find themselves carrying a disproportionate share of cleanup costs if they don't find effective means of handling toxic waste at the outset.

Kocheisen was a panel member in a workshop earlier this month, "Waste May be Hazardous to Your Health: The Role of Local Government." The workshop was sponsored by the Alaska Municipal League and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

Jeff Mach, chief of DEC's Solid and Hazardous Waste Management Section, said Alaska generates relatively little hazardous waste — 1,000 to 2,000 tons a year, compared to Texas, the largest producer in the United States, which generates 40 million tons a year. Mach noted that a total of 275 million tons is generated each year in the nation.

Mach said, however, that in Alaska hazardous waste is generally produced by households, small businesses and government agencies. And the problem the state faces is transportation, he said, because the state just doesn't produce enough of the waste to attract large handlers.

Mach said DEC is working closely with businesses in an effort to assist them in changing processes to reduce the amount of hazardous waste produced. For example, he said when the *Juneau Empire* built its new plant, it

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was specifically designed with assistance from DEC to reduce hazardous waste.

Chris Mello, hazardous materials coordinator for the North Slope Borough, talked about the borough's decision three years ago to look into prevention, rather than disposal.

He noted that rather than throwing out waste oil, the borough started burning it in special burners. Solvents also are cleaned and re-used, rather than discarded.

In addition, Mello said villages are now asked to segregate waste, which saves in disposal costs.

Bill Kryger, project manager for the Municipality of Anchorage's Solid Waste Services Department, discussed how the city has built a hazardous waste facility, which has been in operation since February. He said the facility is the largest such operation for

household hazardous waste in the United States.

"We feel we're ahead of the game," he said, noting that since it opened, the facility has handled more than 300,000 pounds of hazardous waste, including 23,000 items brought by 2,100 customers — households and small businesses.

In addition, he pointed out that 55 percent of the waste is recycled, which is a dramatic reduction in what is sent to the landfill.

Rep. Kay Brown, D-Anchorage, said that nationally the emphasis is starting to shift from pollution control to pollution prevention, but she said that still only about 1 percent of the \$70 billion spent nationally goes toward hazardous waste prevention.

However, there is more and more interest in reducing waste at the source, she said, because people are realizing it's a lot cheaper to focus on that than cleanup.