

Rural Alaskans at risk from hazardous wastes

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Suicide, alcoholism, 3-wheeler accidents, clean water, and adequate sewage facilities rank high on the list of public and environmental health issues confronting rural Alaskans. The seeds of another public and environmental health threat are just

ing activities. Equally disturbing is the number of unreported and uninvestigated incidents occurring monthly in Bush and urban areas alike.

As recent as 1981 it was thought that Alaska produced only 400 tons of hazardous wastes annually. Four years later we find that Anchorage alone may be producing 10 times that amount and

detailed analysis of hazardous materials exposures and mishaps in the Bush. To date, many of the incidents we know about have not been investigated from a public health perspective.

How Can Bush Residents Address These Issues?

There are ways to manage hazardous materials while developing and maintaining an economic base. Unlike most of our society, rural Alaskans can see clearly that occupational illness and disease are not confined to the workplace, but easily invade the community and effect the general public.

With this insight, rural communities should begin now to prepare for hazardous materials emergencies. The first step in this process is performing a Community Health Hazard Evaluation (CHHE). By evaluating a community for industrial health hazards and creating a chemical profile of their town, rural Alaskans can determine their capabilities in the event of a hazardous materials emergency. An evaluation will also indicate measures to improve their ability to respond. Furthermore, by working now to develop a preventive program, rural towns will avoid the costs associated with environmental degradation, and human illness and disease.

What Is a Community Health Hazard Evaluation?

While there is no strict formula for a proper CHHE, the following describes key elements that should be included. After performing these basic tasks, evaluators can modify their CHHE to fit the community's specific needs.

STEP ONE: inventory historical incidents involving hazardous materials in your area. This information will provide you with information necessary to prevent such incidents from reoccurring.

STEP TWO: Inventory the types and quantities of hazardous wastes and materials generated in your community. Determine the generation point of these substances. This combined with Step One will become the basis

with high density public areas.

STEP FOUR: Evaluate your community's ability to respond in the event of emergency. Analyze training and knowledge of emergency response personnel, adequacy of health care facilities, emergency response equipment, hazardous materials disposal facilities, and the amount of assistance that can be expected from state and federal agencies, and neighboring communities.

STEP FIVE: Develop a preventive hazardous materials plan to meet community needs found in Steps 1 through 4.

STEP SIX: Implement plan and review annually.

"The seeds of another public and environmental health threat are being planted in the bush with potentially devastating consequences..."

now being planted in the Bush with potentially devastating consequences. As Alaska seeks to diversify its economic base and Native Alaskans strive for a cash economy, the inherent problems associated with hazardous materials and hazardous wastes become an increasing reality.

Already numerous widely publicized incidents involving hazardous materials have occurred in rural Alaska. These incidents include PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyls) at old military sites in Aniak, Kake and Unalakleet; PCP, or Pentachlorophenol (a wood preservative) posing a serious public health risk at Ketchikan; and the threat of heavy metal contamination of drinking water from min-

the entire state might be producing up to 40 times that figure.

In addition, a closer look reveals many "gaps" in the state's ability to respond to hazardous materials incidents in the Bush. Hamstrung by budget cuts, lack of trained personnel and inadequate laboratory facilities, Department of Environmental Conservation's principle role in rural hazardous materials incidences is reactive, not preventive.

Compounding this situation, the Department of Health and Social Services is not asked to review the public health consequences associated with industrial growth in the Bush. It does not have the investigative capacity, nor the personnel to perform

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for your community's chemical profile.

STEP THREE: Determine hazardous materials transportation and storage patterns and their proximity to residential and other public areas such as schools, hospitals, etc. This information may result in shifting transportation corridors to avoid contact

No one knows for certain what the results of reckless handling of hazardous materials will produce in your community. Historically, disease and environmental destruction has followed such carelessness. If history is any indication of present and future dangers, it would be wise for rural Alaskans to begin now to seriously address this issue.