

New Responses to Emerging Environmental Problems in USA

The Conservation Foundation, a non-profit group based in Washington, DC, conducts research on emerging issues in environmental and resource management. In June of this year, the Foundation published a report entitled *State of the Environment: An Assessment at Mid-Decade**—a comprehensive, independent assessment of the conditions prevailing in air, water, hazardous waste, agriculture, and other resource issues.

In its study, the Foundation argues that US environmental laws need readjusting as more is learned about how pollutants behave in the environment, and as measuring capabilities improve to detect minute traces of toxic chemicals. 'The understanding of environmental problems in the early 1970s, when the framework for current US environmental programs was established, has been superseded by knowledge gained during the past decade,' the report says.

State of the Environment documents significant progress in environmental areas where laws and institutions have been explicitly devised to address specific problems. Most conventional air pollutants—for example, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, and particulates—no longer pose a health threat to nearby communities. The majority of US rivers are suitable for fishing and swimming. Exposure to some specific toxic substances—lead, PCBs, and DDT, for instance—has declined. But this progress, the Foundation warns, should not obscure many points of controversy in ongoing environmental programmes. Thus budget cuts at the national and state levels over the past few years have weakened environmental programmes, while environmental monitoring and research are often inadequate to evaluate existing programmes or to identify new problems. Many potentially harmful toxic substances are not adequately monitored, and accordingly no means are provided of assessing any risks which they may pose.

The report discusses in depth several issues such as risk assessment, water resources, and intergovernmental relations. It particularly emphasizes the problem of 'cross-media' pollution—that is, the tendency of pollutants to move readily from one medium, such as air or water, to another, such as soil. An example illustrates the problem: a municipal wastewater treatment-plant removes a heavy-metal from city wastewater, thus preventing it from polluting a nearby stream; the waste sludge containing the pollutant is deposited in a landfill, however, from which the heavy-metal infiltrates

ground-water, the source of drinking-water for the community. 'Instead of reducing human and environmental exposure to toxics,' *State of the Environment* concludes, 'much of the existing control effort may simply be shifting pollutants from one part of the environment to another.'

What can be done about cross-media pollution? To address this question, the Conservation Foundation began last year a three-years' research project to consider options for redesigning pollution control programmes to reflect the cross-media phenomenon. Drawing on research findings and experience in implementing environmental programmes, this effort is considering how United States regulators can establish and enforce standards for air and water pollution that take into account the movement of pollutants through different parts of the environment.

In addition to its research on emerging issues, the Conservation Foundation plays an active role in addressing some of the issues which it investigates. The Foundation sponsors dialogues on timely issues, drawing together representatives from environmental groups, business, government, and other sectors. One dialogue group, involving leaders in the chemical industry and the environmental community, considered over nearly a year how to speed the cleanup of toxic-waste dumps. Out of this effort came a proposal to create a non-profit corporation that, subject to the review and approval of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), will bring additional resources to bear on the waste-site problem. The new corporation, Clean Sites, Inc., which was officially established on 31 May 1984 in Washington, DC, will convene parties responsible for waste at a given site to negotiate a plan for financing cleanup of the site. Clean Sites will also prepare technical plans for cleanups, and will oversee actual cleanup work. Russell Train, president of World Wildlife Fund-US and former Administrator of EPA, will be Chairman of the Board of Directors of this new institution.

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