



John Muir Chapter

Sierra Club - John Muir Chapter
222 South Hamilton Street, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53703-3201
Telephone: (608) 256-0565, Fax: (608) 256-4562
cterrell@execpc.com; wisconsin.sierraclub.org

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Contact: Caryl Terrell, SC 608-256-0565

Political Hanky-Panky at DNR Could Clear the Way for Mount Trashmores

(MADISON, WI) The Wisconsin Sierra Club today charged that the Department of Natural Resources political appointees were threatening catastrophic landfill failures by overriding its own staff's warnings and capitulating to pressure from the large landfill companies.

"Political hanky-panky at the Department of Natural Resources is clearing the way for landfill expansions that will be known as Mount Trashmores," said Caryl Terrell, Chapter Director for the statewide John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club. "The DNR abruptly reversed course on landfill rules that put drinking water supplies and human safety at risk."

The dispute involves proposed rules to repeal key provisions banning mega-sized landfills in Wisconsin. Megafills, commonly referred to as 'Mount Trashmores,' are manmade mountains of garbage, hundreds of feet high, seven or more times the largest currently in Wisconsin today.

Because current rules also permit landfill owners to abandon their landfills 40 years after the sites close, and it is now recognized that unmaintained sites will fail soon afterwards, the prospect of megafills creates the prospect of major landslides, called garbalanches. An example of one occurred near Cincinnati in 1999, Terrell pointed out. (See attached picture.)

"As many as 13 of the 23 major landfills in the state that are near urbanizing areas could cause devastating damage when a garbalanche happens," Terrell said. "This is precisely why the DNR staff said that mega-fills should not be allowed unless the rules are also changed to require up front payments by the landfill companies for perpetual care in an attempt to sustain maintenance long enough to protect the environment."

"DNR engineers initially had a commitment from their managers to link the longer leachate lines sought by the landfill industry to that pre-paid perpetual care. But, just before the staff were about to come out with those essential long term care rules, DNR political appointees and administrators pulled the plug on these essential protections," Terrell said. "One has to guess that a lobbyist for the waste industry influenced DNR's political appointees to make this drastic change."

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Glenn Stoddard, legal counsel for the Sierra Club, stated, "Unfortunately, the DNR is apparently not taking its legal responsibilities under WEPA seriously. It is our view that an environmental impact statement must be done on this rule. If the DNR is unwilling to follow the law, we will seriously consider taking appropriate legal action to force the issue."

Peter Anderson, a solid waste consultant commissioned by the Sierra Club to evaluate the issues related to the proposed rule, pointed out that the political accommodations here may rank as one of the most unbalanced trade offs in the state's history. "The costs to address the catastrophic landfill failures that are inevitable in the future can be in the hundreds of millions of dollars at the worst mega-fills. Since the industry's plans are to abandon those sites by that time, the costs will wind up on the backs of the taxpayers. In 1994," he recounted, "political contributions that couldn't have totaled more than \$100,000 overrode the position of the South Carolina's DNR staff that Safety-Kleen post a \$133 million bond before proceeding further at its Lake Marion hazardous waste landfill. Today, Safety-Kleen has filed bankruptcy and the state is now facing a billion dollar clean up cost."

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Rumpke landfill near Cincinnati collapses causing fire
Photo by Cheryl Allen
Ohio DNR