

Mr. Grant Erdel  
Staff Member  
The Office of Representative Jo Ann Emerson  
Washington D.C. 20515-2508

Dear Mr. Erdel:

This letter responds to a June 22, 2000 letter received from Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson seeking information on the issues raised in a letter from N. Isgriggs, of Cuba, MO. N. Isgriggs expressed concerns about the importing of toxic waste into the United States.

There are legitimate reasons why toxic, or hazardous, waste is imported and exported. Oftentimes, the nearest waste management facility capable of handling a particular waste may be on the other side of an international border from where it was generated. Most of the U.S. imports of hazardous waste are for recycling. This recycling is crucial to certain U.S. companies. In some cases the reclamation of these wastes yield valuable materials such as precious metals which are needed in American manufacturing processes. Some toxic wastes shipped to the U.S. come from American plants abroad and these companies may want their waste safely handled under the stringent U.S. system or their plant may be in a foreign country which does not have the environmental technology to properly handle the hazardous waste.

The treatment of hazardous waste to significantly reduce or eliminate its toxicity is usually a highly technical field. Not every country has every treatment and disposal technology needed for all hazardous wastes. So just as the U.S. exports hazardous waste to other countries when that is the most environmentally and economically beneficial option, other countries also send waste to the U.S. for proper treatment, recycling and disposal.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) believes that hazardous waste entering the U.S. should be regulated to ensure a high level of safety for our citizens and we take strong measures to ensure that imports of hazardous waste are handled safely.

Over the years, EPA has developed and continues to develop the world's most stringent >cradle-to-grave= hazardous waste management system under the auspices of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA). RCRA provides rigorous authorities over hazardous waste generation and management, and we believe our strong regulatory program affords a high level of protection to human health and the environment. In addition, EPA works closely with the U.S. Customs Service and the Department of Transportation (DOT) to ensure that hazardous wastes imports are properly packaged and documented, and comply with our regulations. EPA and Customs also conduct random spot checks at our borders.

EPA is not aware of waste imports to the U.S. as being the cause of significant environmental problems. In fact, the U.S. imports a relatively small amount of hazardous waste in comparison to domestic hazardous waste generation. Any waste or hazardous waste imported into the U.S. is immediately subject to the full body of applicable RCRA regulations and any other applicable U.S. laws and regulations. U.S. policy has been to focus on assuring that our hazardous waste is safely transported and that waste facilities are well-operated whether they are managing wastes generated within the U.S. or the occasional import from another country. I believe our current program is working well to protect human health and the environment from any hazards related to waste imports. However, we continue to work to strengthen the program.

Your constituent mentioned Great Britain, Africa, India and Israel as a sources of hazardous waste shipments to the United States. To the best of EPA's knowledge there is very little hazardous waste being shipped from these countries or continent to the United States. Because of the stringent system controlling hazardous waste in the U.S., it is likely that wastes will only be imported by those who want to assure management according to high environmental standards.

I hope I have adequately addressed the issues raised by your constituent. Thank you and your constituent for your interest in the safe management of wastes within the United States. Please feel free to contact us at any time on issues of concern to you or your constituents.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Cotsworth, Director

Office of Solid Waste

cc: Michele McKeever

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