Resource Conservation and Recovery Act Encyclopedia Article

Resource Conservation and Recovery Act

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Resource Conservation and Recovery Act

The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) of 1976 is a federal law aimed at protecting human health and the environment by safely managing and reducing hazardous and solid nonhazardous waste. It gives the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the task of controlling hazardous waste, through safety regulations, permits, and inspections, from its creation to disposal or from "cradle to grave." RCRA also aims to conserve energy and natural resources by giving states or regions the job of developing programs for nonhazardous waste, such as recycling and waste reduction programs. RCRA is an amendment to the 1965 Solid Waste Disposal Act. It became effective in 1980 but does not apply to sites abandoned before this date, which are addressed by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA).

The 1984 Hazardous and Solid Waste Amendments (HSWA) to RCRA, sometimes called the "land ban," were a response to concern about hazardous wastes leaking into groundwater. HSWA states that only treated hazardous wastes may be disposed of on or beneath the ground, unless it can be guaranteed that they will not leak out. It also imposes safety requirements on landfills and other land-based hazardous waste disposal facilities. These include leakproof liners and systems to monitor and capture leachate. One consequence of the costly treatment requirements for land disposal of hazardous waste has been a reduction in the amount of hazardous waste; manufacturers have been motivated to substitute nonhazardous materials. HASW also regulates the three to five million underground storage tanks (USTs) containing petroleum and hazardous products, as distinct from waste. In September 1988 the EPA gave tank owners and operators ten years within which to replace, upgrade, or close existing USTs. Regular inspections are required to help prevent leaks.

In 2002, in one of the largest-ever hazardous waste settlements, Mobil Oil Corporation agreed to pay $11.2 million for the alleged mismanagement of benzene-contaminated waste in Staten Island, New York. Despite this and other successes, many facilities holding hazardous waste permits have not been inspected between 2000 and 2002, as required by RCRA, according to information made public by the EPA.

Internet Resource

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Enforcement and Compliance History." Available from http://www.epa.gov.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "RCRA." Available from http://www.epa.gov.