

Landfills Offer False Sense of Security

G. Fred Lee, PhD, PE, DEE
G. Fred Lee & Associates, El Macero, CA

and

William Sheehan, PhD
Sierra Club, Athens, GA

Published as: Lee, G.F., and Sheehan, W., "Landfills Offer False Sense of Security," *Biocycle* 37(9):8, September (1996).

Municipal solid waste (MSW) leachate, even with extensive waste diversion, contains a large number of hazardous and toxic chemicals that can render groundwater unusable for drinking and other basic purposes. "Dry tomb" landfills of the type being developed today in accordance with current federal regulations attempt to isolate wastes using plastic sheeting and compacted soil/clay liners to keep the wastes dry and contain any leachate within the landfill. The major "improvement" offered by landfills of this type is postponement of groundwater pollution by at least a few years, and at most a century.

It is widely acknowledged that such liners deteriorate over time and ultimately fail to prevent moisture, which generates leachate, from entering the landfill. Keeping garbage dry will require maintenance and periodic replacement of the cap in perpetuity. Today's landfill regulations transfer the economic and public health burdens associated with groundwater pollution to future generations. They also postpone pressure on society to develop long-term MSW management alternatives.

Today's landfilling regulations evolved from a technology that was developed in the early 1980s, and are out of date. The federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) needs to be updated to develop landfills that will protect groundwater for the long term. Landfilling is the cheapest option for managing discarded resources/waste only if the costs of perpetual maintenance and the associated groundwater contamination are ignored.