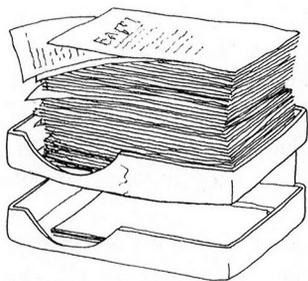


Letters to the Editor



Dear Editor:

After several weeks of dealing with budgets, reorganization, and program priorities, I took a breather to read "When Science Crosses Politics, I: The Case of Naturally Occurring Asbestos" in the June 2004 *Journal*. I could not help but wonder how many

other county/local-government environmental directors in high-growth areas were reading the same and saying, "Change the names of the county, the environmental director, and the issue, and there you have 'Us.'" If you are looking for topics besides the individual-sewage-treatment-system (ISTS) issue already scheduled, I would suggest feedlots and communications towers. These would be fertile areas.

I can't help but add a few comments about activists. History shows they have a place, have moved change, and can't all be lumped together. But personal experience shows that many have agendas that have little or nothing to do with health and the environment and something to do with personal gain. I always have hope when an activist shows up on my doorstep looking to move positive change forward faster than I can. Government does move too slowly many times. But this hope often turns to disgust as the activist turns to half-truths, innuendos, and, yes, even lies, to further an agenda. These are often at the expense of the county staff, who must reasonably stick to rules, regulations, and research while being civil and diplomatic.

A case in point. An activist I had hope for called me the afternoon before an important public-input deadline. Staff mathematical calculations were called into question by the activist. I carefully rechecked our info and found no mistakes—and a simple explanation for the activist's concern. This took some "overtime." I called the activist after hours to provide the info so that the activist's data would not be called into question and result in a loss of credibility for the activist in a public setting. The activist asked why I sounded defensive. I apologized and explained that I knew I was providing information that would not support the activist's case and that people typically do try to "shoot the messenger." The activist thanked me for providing the info, putting in extra effort, and went on to assure me that my staff and I had acted like consummate professionals regarding this issue and that our professionalism was greatly appreciated.

Ahhh, a job well done, right? Wrong. Two days later a letter from the activist was delivered to the head of an overseeing state agency, newspapers, and the county board chair accusing me of purging files and withholding information—among other things.

Sometimes being an environmental director is a lot like Charleston Heston's acting career. I can think of at least two movies in which he got a big spear in the front of the chest—not just a knife

in the back. And no matter how thick your skin is, after years of faithful public service, that still hurts.

I can't help but mention one other issue touched on in the article: "university experts." Local government staff are often held to much higher standards than many university staff when it comes to private endeavors. It seems that some universities encourage "moonlighting" by university staff. No doubt this has moved progress in many areas where a talented individual has accomplished "good" unfettered by strict university policies, procedures, and/or tight budgets. But we now have "university experts"—sometimes from the same university's department—representing both sides of controversial issues. Confusion reigns.

The article reinforced what a difficult job environmental officials and politicians have in high-growth areas. Hopefully we continue to take the high road—which in this case often means walking the tightrope without a net.

I look forward to your take on individual sewage treatment systems and politics.

Sincerely,
 Michael Lein, R.E.H.S.
 Environmental Services Director
 Carver County, Minnesota

Dear Editor:

I read your interesting article in the June 2004 *Journal of Environmental Health* titled "When Science Crosses Politics, I: The Case of Naturally Occurring Asbestos." I wish you had observed and asked a few things further, which, to me, make this issue much clearer and simpler. For example:

- The "wait for the epidemiology/wait for the body counts" mantra is out of step with rational science in this situation.
 - Epidemiologic studies all over the world have proven that asbestos causes mesothelioma with no known lower threshold.
 - Epidemiologic studies have shown cigarette smoking causes lung cancer.
 - What would you say to a person or group who said, "We can't be sure smoking is a risk for smokers on a newly discovered island until that island has its own epidemiologic study and there are bodies to count on that island?"
 - It should be the same for asbestos. It is a (scientifically) done deal.
 - With a disease like mesothelioma, which has a latency of several decades, it is difficult to see why anyone would risk exposing the most vulnerable people (young children) to a hazard not likely to manifest as a fatal disease for several decades. These easily recognized and preventable excess exposures to such hazards should cease.
- If the persons advocating for no regulation or limits on development are so sure there is no asbestos hazard, then why don't

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they notify all residents that they (the persons advocating for no regulation) will assume full liability and costs for future mesothelioma cases?

- The U.S. EPA level of "1 percent in soil" is based on empirical practicality of analytical methods (not on health risk); lower concentrations would require more difficult and costly testing.
 - "Less than 1 percent asbestos in soil" translates into "less than 10 billion asbestos fibers per gram of soil." A simple calculation based on the size and mass of an average asbestos fiber will tell you that in a single gram of pure (100%) asbestos there will be on the order of one trillion fibers (1,000,000,000,000 fibers/gram in pure asbestos).
- If you can find anyone to suggest this level (less than 10,000,000,000 asbestos fibers per gram) prevents risk from asbestos exposure, please include his or her comments.
- I do not think it is necessary to disguise the identification of the location in question. The information is widely available on the Internet.

Sincerely,

Jerrold L. Abraham, M.D.

Professor of Pathology

Director of Environmental and Occupational Pathology

SUNY Upstate Medical University

Syracuse, New York

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed your June 2004 *Journal of Environmental Health* article on asbestos-related issues in Bellevue County, and felt it was pretty fairly presented. It's too bad that people are up in arms so much about dealing with the science of this issue.

I'm a politician in Bellevue County, although I have a computer science background (and a secret scientist streak in me). It's somewhat amusing to see the political and environmental gymnastics involved on both sides of the story, and as I mentioned to a local reporter, the worst of this entire episode is not (as he claimed) the misinformation of each side in presenting their evidence (or defending their position), but which I stated as being the frequent omission of all information relevant to the issue, accentuated with emotional imagery of agonizingly painful death sentences upon all who live near any asbestos.

I welcome the information being fairly presented, and your article highlights some of the conflicts inherent in bringing that information out in a fair manner. My position in all of this up to now has been taken at a somewhat subdued level of interest, only coming out when I see or hear what I believe (or what my bias inclines me to believe) to be egregious examples of extremely biased data or claims, or when I see the dissemination of information to the press without adequate or fair representation by the other side.

This partiality has been primarily driven by our local newspaper, the *Post*, which is a more liberal newspaper, leaning heavily toward environmental issues in the stories it covers with editorializing, its writing styles and slants, and its feature articles. The pattern that I see that has concerned me is the perception of U.S. EPA releasing information or results without fair warning to all parties involved as promised (and with some omissions). I'm not sure if the newspaper editorially omits information, but the lack of information released by U.S. EPA to all parties and of the amount of data published in the newspaper has led me to believe that the EPA is playing a big part in these omissions.

While the *Journal of Environmental Health* article portrays the integrity of the scientists in all of this, I believe that there are biases as well within U.S. EPA (or any environmental health organization), as evidenced by controversies surrounding data releases about carcinogenic materials and fallout patterns (and related health risks) at the time of the World Trade Center bombings.

While outside the scope of your article, one interesting element behind the scenes as well is a recent convention of asbestos science experts in San Francisco in 2003 (see www.epa.gov/superfund/programs/risk/asbestos/pdfs/ and www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/asbestospanel/index.html). It highlighted several areas for which there are no adequate scientific data, but that U.S. EPA is now starting to address. The convention also addressed multiplicative (health-related) issues such as smoking that may affect the related risks of cancer within a populace after exposure to asbestos.

The data on these areas are inadequate, but U.S. EPA is not forthcoming on these deficiencies, and the resulting frustration by interested parties is widespread. Indeed, as your article states, the public wants to have the data as well, but is frustrated by the conflicting political and environmental forces at work who dig out selective portions of data to suit their own purposes.

One of the political issues that is being faced in such an investigation is the costs associated with mitigation. While the conference in 2003 highlighted areas for improvement, and subsequent U.S. EPA documents point to steps to take for data collection, the costs associated with gathering data and with mitigation are being borne by the local school districts (high school and elementary/middle) as well as the local community services district (of which I'm a board member). I believe that the data collection (with firm results) should be the responsibility of the agency that has regulatory oversight. Mitigation costs should be borne by the affected parties, but only after firm data is collected. As it stands, we are currently not getting consistent data results, and this leaves a lot of room for political and environmental parties to point fingers, leaving scientists in the middle.

So, yes, I do believe that there exists scientific and academic bias within those agencies providing oversight as well. I believe it would best suit the scientists in the interim to be honest with themselves about what data they do or do not have, to not give answers to

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either side that cannot be backed up by data, and to be fair about the full dissemination of available data. When it's done surreptitiously as seen locally here, it brings a cloud of suspicion upon the scientists who have the data, particularly as it pertains to suspected biases. Such equitable practices would undermine the efforts of any group (political or environmental) to create their own spin. And that would be beneficial to all sides.

Thank you, Rebecca Berg, for highlighting some of the biases inherent with environmental issues. Perhaps you should follow up with an article in which the microscope can be turned to the inside as well?

I have always believed in being upfront and honest in my efforts as a private citizen and as a politician.

Anonymous Author

Dear Editor:

I've had the July/August 2004 issue of the *Journal* for several days now. I read the article written by Rebecca Berg, "When Science Crosses Politics II: Getting Down to Earth in the Great Wastewater Disputes," as soon as the *Journal* arrived. Then I set it aside to read again later to see if my initial reaction to it might change. It didn't.

I want you to know that I think NEHA has an exceptional talent in Rebecca. When I read the first part of her in-depth series in the June issue, I was impressed by her impartiality and ability to

present all sides of a complex issue, as well as put in some very educational sidebars. However, I had no emotional investment in the first story she told (about naturally occurring asbestos), and I wondered whether I would find the same elements of impartiality and presentation of all sides when I read my own personal story.

My trepidation was unwarranted! Rebecca did a superb job in researching and reporting what was a very charged, hot issue and period of time—a period of time that, frankly, I seldom think about any more. Rebecca's article brought it all back with absolute clarity. Even after the passage of several years, her article made me feel as if it was yesterday.

She not only captured the facts, she also got the nuances. I don't know if it was intentional in her writing, but I also felt and saw once again the unhelpful attitudes of a couple of the most significant players. She was so on target!

I would like to congratulate Rebecca on her work and thank the *Journal of Environmental Health* for presenting, probably for the very first time, a complete and accurate rendition of a trying incident. I hope that those who read her article gain the understanding that environmental health is intrinsically political, no matter how scientifically based what we do is.

Sincerely,

"Jane Gordon" 

Products & Services

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EnviroMapper for Water—New Version

EnviroMapper for Water is a Web-based geographic information system (GIS) application and mapping interface to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) geospatial data. It dynamically displays information about bodies of water in the United States. Users can view and map data on

- the uses assigned to local waters by a given state (e.g., fishing or swimming);
- waters that are impaired and do not support their assigned uses;
- the reasons for impairment of waters (i.e., the causes and sources of pollution in those waters);
- water quality monitoring information;
- closures of swimming beaches; and
- the location of dischargers to water.

More specifically, EnviroMapper for Water allows users to view different sets of map feature layers at national, regional, state, and local levels. It enables user control of the map including the display of multiple feature layers; identification and labeling of features; zooming; panning; and display of descriptive information (latitude and longitude coordinates, watershed, ecoregion, state, county) for a specific location.

New water program feature layers include National Estuary Programs, STORET Water Quality Stations, Nonpoint Source Projects, and Clean Watersheds Needs. This version also provides more tips for using EnviroMapper for Water; users may find the following additions particularly useful:

- a step-by-step description of how to display water program data,
- "all about labels," and
- "creating a map for your own Web page."

For more information, visit www.epa.gov/waters/enviromapper/.

