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# MSW Management

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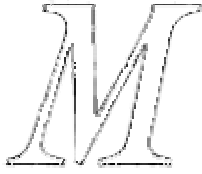
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DRY TOMB LANDFILLS



# DRY TOMB LANDFILLS

*Nothing stays buried forever. We review major deficiencies of dry tomb landfilling and present alternative approaches for managing MSW that will provide greater protection for public health, groundwater resources, and the environment.*

**G. FRED LEE AND ANNE JONES LEE**



SW management has evolved in the US from open dumps through classical sanitary landfills to dry tomb sanitary landfills. The dry tomb sanitary landfilling approach is basically an open dump in which each day's wastes are covered by a few inches of soil (classical sanitary landfill) where compacted soil (clay) and plastic sheeting (flexible membrane liners (known as FMLs) are used to try to isolate the untreated MSW from moisture. This containment system also is designed to try to collect and manage the leachate (garbage juice) generated within the dry tomb that results from the entrance of moisture into the tomb. Other countries and geographical areas in parts of Canada Western Europe have chosen not to adopt the dry tomb method of MSW landfilling, typically because of the likelihood of the ultimate failure of the dry tomb containment (liner) system to prevent moisture from entering the landfill and to collect all leachate generated in the landfill.

**Deficiencies in Subtitle D Landfills** USEPA (1988a), as part of developing Subtitle D regulations, stated in the August 1988 *Federal Register*:

"First, even the best liner and leachate collection system will ultimately fail due to natural deterioration, and recent improvements in MSWLF (municipal solid waste landfill) containment technologies suggest that releases may be delayed by many decades at some landfills.

USEPA Criteria for Municipal Solid Waste Landfills (USEPA 1988b) states:

"Once the unit is closed, the bottom layer of the landfill will deteriorate over time and, consequently, will not prevent leachate transport out of the unit."

The situation today is no different than it was in 1988. There is no doubt that a composite liner, including a double-composite-liner system composed of plastic sheeting and compacted soil conforming to minimum Subtitle D requirements, will not prevent landfill leachate from passing through the liner system into the aquifer system associated with the landfill for as long as the wastes in the landfill represent a threat. This eventually will lead to pollution of the groundwater hydraulically connected to the landfill.

**Thirty-year Postclosure Maintenance** Commentaries on USEPA-proposed Subtitle D landfill regulations (Lee and Jones, 1988) discussed

the ability of then-proposed dry tomb landfilling approach to protect public health, groundwater quality, and the environment from adverse impacts of the wastes for as long as the MSW in the tomb would be a threat. While RCRA and USEPA Subtitles C and D mandated a minimum 30-year postclosure maintenance and monitoring period, the agency did recognize that this period may need to be expanded where it specifies that the regional administrator may extend the postclosure maintenance monitoring period beyond the minimum 30 years.

It is obvious, considering the characteristics of MSW and the processes that take place in dry tomb landfills, that MSW in a dry tomb sanitary landfill will be a threat to public health, groundwater resources, and the environment for as long as the landfill exists (Lee and Jones-Lee, 1992; 1993). The inorganics (metals, salts) and many organics will be a threat, effectively, forever. Lee and Jones-Lee (1994b) have recommended that the minimum 30-year postclosure maintenance and monitoring period should be abandoned in favor of expanded, perpetual-funded maintenance and monitoring. Hickman (1992; 1995) has urged that a dedicated trust fund be developed for all landfills to meet contingencies that may be encountered in the future.

**Inadequate Postclosure Care Funding** Lee and Jones-Lee recommend that the postclosure maintenance and monitoring funding be developed from additional disposal fees that are placed in a dedicated trust that can be used only to meet the closure/postclosure maintenance and monitoring needs. They recommend the magnitude of the trust fund be sufficient to eventually exhume (mine) the wastes in the landfill and properly manage these wastes so they do not represent threats to public health, groundwater resources, and the environment. Lee and Jones-Lee (1995a) have recently reviewed the problems with current dry tomb landfill closure and postclosure maintenance and monitoring approaches and have recommended approaches for closure and postclosure maintenance for classical sanitary and dry tomb Subtitle D landfills.

Since, with few exceptions, both of the types of landfills (classical and dry tomb sanitary landfills) will pollute groundwaters and the aquifer system hydraulically connected to the landfill, the key to public health and environmental protection is the establishment of a leak-detectable cover that prevents moisture from entering the landfill after closure. The current Subtitle D regulations allowed the closure of a dry tomb sanitary landfill with a cover that does not necessary keep the wastes dry so that the landfill does not generate leachate that can penetrate the landfill liners and pollute the groundwaters associated with the landfill. The development of the funding necessary to operate and maintain the leak-detectable cover is also a key component of proper closure of dry tomb sanitary landfills.

**Inadequate Groundwater Monitoring** One of the most significant deficiencies with USEPA Subtitle D sanitary landfills is the unreliability of the groundwater monitoring system typically allowed to detect when liner leakage occurs. Subtitle D regulations require that the groundwater at the point of compliance, which is equal to or less than 500 ft. downstream from the waste management unit, meet drinking water standards. The typical groundwater monitoring approach at the point of compliance involves placing vertical monitoring wells spaced hundreds to a thousand or more feet apart. Cherry (1989) and, more recently, Lee and Jones-Lee (1994a) have discussed the inability of this monitoring well array to reliably detect groundwater pollution by landfill leachate before widespread groundwater pollution occurs beyond the point of compliance.



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The narrow plumes produced by initial leaks of the Subtitle D single-composite-liner system will readily pass between the vertical monitoring wells that are used to monitor leachate-polluted groundwater at the point

of compliance. These wells have zones of capture of approximately 1 ft around the well. In order to be effective, such monitoring wells would have to be spaced approximately 10 ft. apart. Michigan's Department of Natural Resources, through the development of the state's Rule 641 governing MSW landfilling, recognized the deficiencies in the USEPA Subtitle D groundwater monitoring approach and adopted double-composite-lined MSW landfills where the lower-composite liner is a leak-detection system for the upper Subtitle D composite liner. There is a leak detection layer between the upper liner and the lower liner. The collection of leachate in the leak-detection system between the two liners is a clear indication that the liner has failed.

At this time, however, Michigan does not require that adequate funding be made available to take action to either stop the leachate production which is passing into the leak-detection system between the two composite liners or remove the wastes from the landfill. Lee and Jones-Lee (1994a) recommend that a trust fund be developed from disposal fees to facilitate action when needed to prevent leachate from passing through the lower-composite liner and polluting the groundwaters near the landfill. This dedicated trust would ensure that funds are available whenever they are needed at any time in the future to address the composite liner.



**ALTERNATIVE LANDFILLING APPROACHES** At this time the US is the only country that has adopted the dry tomb sanitary landfilling approach. Several states such as New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania determined in the 1980s that a single-composite liner of the type adopted by USEPA in 1991 as Subtitle D minimum

requirements would not be adequate to protect groundwater resources from pollution by landfill leachate in dry tomb landfills. Since the promulgation of these regulations by USEPA in 1991, a number of other states such as Arizona, Michigan, Kentucky, and Oregon have adopted double-composite liners for MSW landfills. As the significant deficiencies in minimum Subtitle D landfill liner and cover systems are becoming more widely recognized, it is likely that many other states will adopt double-composite-lined MSW landfills as the minimum needed for protecting groundwater resources from pollution by landfill leachate. It is important, however, in adopting double-composite liners not to try to rely on the lower-composite liner as a containment liner. Instead it should be part of a leak-detection system for the upper-composite liner.

MSW leachate recycle in which leachate is introduced back into the landfill has been found to potentially greatly accelerate the "stabilization" of the landfill. This so-called stabilization is the conversion of fermentable organics in the wastes into carbon dioxide and methane (landfill gas). EMCON (1975; 1976); headquartered in Pebble Beach, CA, conducted one of the most definitive demonstration projects on the value of MSW leachate recycle. In that study it was found that the landfill gas production processes that normally take 30 to 50 years in a conventional sanitary landfill could be accelerated to take place in four to five years under field conditions.

## **LEACHATE RECYCLE IN LANDFILLS**

Recently considerable attention has been given to leachate recycle in Subtitle D landfills. Much of this attention arises from the fact that leachate disposal is expensive at some landfills. Recycling leachate back into the landfill at some locations is initially an inexpensive way to dispose of leachate. Lee et al. (1986) have discussed the importance of shredding MSW as part of any leachate recycle project to break up the plastic bags that are used for home and commercial solid waste disposal. Failure to shred the waste could readily hinder the accelerated stabilization of the fermentable components of MSW.

Lee et al. (1985) conducted a comprehensive review of the advantages and disadvantages of MSW leachate recycle. As they point out, some states at that time prohibited leachate recycle due to the potential for increased groundwater pollution associated with the increased hydraulic loading on the landfill. This problem can be especially important in Subtitle D landfills where the single-composite-liner FML makes the groundwater monitoring system particularly ineffective in detecting leachate pollution of groundwater by leakage through the liner. Lee and Jones-Lee (1995b) recommend that MSW leachate recycle only be



conducted in double-composite-lined landfills where the MSW is shredded.

While MSW leachate recycle is well-known to cause accelerated rates of conversion of fermentable organics to landfill gas, the so-called landfill stabilization that occurs in this process does not address the leaching of chemical constituents in the waste. Well-stabilized MSW with respect to gas production still is a significant threat

to groundwater pollution. Lee and Jones (1990) and Lee and Jones-Lee (1993) recommend that following a four- to five-year MSW leachate recycle period at the closure of the landfill a 10- to 15-year clean water leaching of the fermented waste residues be practiced. This "wet cell" approach not only converts the fermentable organics in the landfill to CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>, but also leaches the waste to remove those components of the waste that represent long-term threats to groundwater quality through passage of the leachate through the liners.

This wet cell approach should be conducted in double-composite-lined landfills using shredded wastes in which the lower-composite liner is a leak-detection system for the upper-composite liner. If during the leachate recycle or leaching of the waste with clean water it is found that leachate is detected in the leak-detection system between the two composite liners, then the leachate recycle or clean water leaching should be stopped and the waste exhumed from the landfill.

There is need to change Subtitle D regulations to permit the managed leaching of the wastes with clean water during the time the landfill liners are expected to be effective, in order that the clean water washing of the wastes be accomplished.

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?** The USEPA Subtitle D dry tomb landfilling approach, as adopted in 1991, at best only postpones groundwater pollution by a few decades from what would have occurred in the classical unlined sanitary landfill. Further, the FML in the single-composite liner makes monitoring of liner leakage and groundwater pollution highly unreliable.

Alternative approaches to the dry tomb sanitary landfill include double-composite liners where the lower-composite liner is part of a leachate-detection system for leakage of the Subtitle D liner. The cover used to close a dry tomb sanitary landfill should include a leak-detectable cover that is effectively operated and maintained forever. Adopting this approach should enable the development of dry tomb sanitary landfills that will be protective of public health, groundwater resources, and the environment for as long as the wastes represent a threat.

The wet cell landfilling approach in which a landfill is operated as a biological and chemical reactor to ferment and leach the components of the wastes (gas and leachate) that represent long-term threats to public health and the environment is a method of choice for MSW management. While somewhat more expensive initially, in the long term it would be a far cheaper method of MSW management as a result of removing those components of MSW that represent long-term threats to public health, groundwater resources, and the environment.

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*Reference as:"Lee, G. F. and Jones-Lee, A., 'Dry Tomb Landfills,' MSW Management, 6:82-89 (1996)."*