UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

JULY 2, 1993

Honorable William S. Cohen
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Cohen:

Thank you for your letter of May 13, 1993, regarding the concerns of Anne Pearson with respect to hazardous waste incineration.

First, we appreciate Ms. Pearson's suggestion that storage in concrete structures may be a safer alternative for managing hazardous wastes. However, such storage is not also without risk to human health and the environment. There would need to be a large number of these structures to handle the approximately 200 million tons per year of hazardous waste generated each year. Each of these massive storage structures could eventually leak; and as Ms. Pearson noted, for this alternative to be viable, there would be a need for continuing oversight. Also, there are risks from fires, explosions, storms, floods, or other disasters. Because of these risks, current hazardous waste laws and regulations only permit storage of hazardous waste if the purpose of the storage is to accumulate sufficient quantities to facilitate treatment of the waste.

Ms. Pearson also expressed concern that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cannot show that hazardous waste incinerators can operate at 99.9999% efficiency. EPA requires this efficiency to incinerate dioxin and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) wastes. The incineration of other wastes must occur at 99.99% efficiency. EPA does not issue final permits for incinerators until they have demonstrated that they can meet these efficiency standards.

The final concern raised by Ms. Pearson is the question of how EPA addresses cumulative risk from several sources. For combustion sources, EPA conducts site-specific risk assessments for an individual facility. EPA regulates emissions from the facility to be protective to both an individual and the population potentially exposed to combustion emissions. The risk assessments tend to err on the side of over-predicting risk and the level of protection chosen, called the incremental risk, is based on a risk management decision. EPA selects this incremental risk to be protective for potentially exposed individuals and to ensure that if other sources of contamination are present, the total risk remains below a level of concern.

Hazardous waste management is a complex issue and there is no one solution to the challenges of safe and effective hazardous waste management. However, EPA shares Ms. Pearson's concern about the need for safe and effective management of hazardous wastes. Where possible, source reduction and environmentally sound recycling is the preferred method of management. When combustion, other forms of treatment, and land disposal must be performed, they need to be conducted in an environmentally sound manner. With respect to combustion of hazardous waste, Administrator Browner recently announced the commencement of a broad effort to evaluate not only the most protective regulatory standards for combustion, but also to develop a hazardous waste management approach that better integrates source reduction into our waste management philosophy. This broad effort includes work on the issues raised by your constituent concerning the assessment of all risks, including indirect risk. The enclosed documents, statement by Administrator Browner, and the Environmental Fact Sheets, "Source Reduction and Combustion of Hazardous Waste" and "Hazardous Waste Minimization: Interim Final Guidance for Generators," provide further information about current EPA efforts to promote waste minimization and to assure that combustion of hazardous wastes is protective of human health and the environment.

Thank you for sharing Ms. Pearson's concerns with us. We appreciate your interest in the environment.

Sincerely yours,

Sylvia K. Lowrance, Director
Office of Solid Waste

Enclosures