

Repugnant practices by Republic Services

- By Dr. Stuart Slavin
- Dec 25, 2017
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Scott Pruitt, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, promised this month that he would arrive at a decision in January about how to remediate the West Lake Landfill. To citizens of St. Louis who are not familiar with the situation, here's a quick summary.

Republic Services, the second largest waste-management company in the country, owns the West Lake and Bridgeton landfills in north St. Louis County near Lambert airport. The West Lake Landfill lies in a former quarry, and huge amounts of radioactive material dating to the Manhattan Project were illegally dumped there in 1973. Much of the waste is low-level radioactive material, but evidence exists that highly toxic radionuclides such as Thorium-230 and Uranium-235 are mixed in.

The landfill is unlined, sits on a porous aquifer in a floodplain less than two miles from the Missouri River, upstream from a main water-treatment plant supplying drinking water to St. Louis. It's located in a region prone to tornadoes and periodic devastating earthquakes, both having the potential to cause significant disruption to the landfill.

The Bridgeton Landfill lies adjacent and has a smoldering subsurface fire that's currently 600 feet from the known radioactive portion of the West Lake Landfill. A smaller hotspot appears to be even closer. It's uncertain what will happen if fire reaches the radioactive waste, though thankfully, an atomic explosion is highly unlikely if not impossible. Of greater concern is the possibility of a persistent low-grade fire involving the radioactive material and potentially, a toxic plume of

smoke. Concern is great enough to have led St. Louis County to publish an emergency operations plan in 2014 in the event of a “catastrophic event” at the landfill.

At this point, the EPA is considering two possible interventions, and this is where Republic Services comes in. One option would be to “cap” the site — the option favored by Republic. The second would be to remove the radioactive waste, not favored by Republic because they fear they’ll be ordered to bear a good portion of the cost of this more expensive alternative.

So what is Republic doing? They’ve stepped up a disinformation campaign to deceive the public that the Russian government would be impressed by. They’ve set up a shell organization, Coalition to Keep Us Safe, posing as a grass-roots organization, to spread false information and advocate for the absurd solution of capping. Why absurd? Because the material will be radioactive for millions of years. Caps don’t last millions of years and, importantly, the landfills sit in unlined quarries over a porous aquifer. You can’t put a cap underneath the waste; by definition, it sits on top.

The phony coalition website has earnest citizens of Missouri expressing their preference for capping so that the waste won’t be hauled on Missouri highways and rails. However, radioactive waste has been and continues to be safely hauled in Missouri.

The website links to several opinion pieces published in recent months that appear suspiciously coordinated. Several are written by women, all of whom attack the JustMomsSTL group that has battled to get the dumpsite remediated. All three assert that the JustMoms group is a front for or has questionable ties to the Teamsters. All have misleading titles like “Just Moms STL Has the Right Idea.”

Two are written by women from Washington, D.C.; why would they care about this issue? One of the D.C.-based writers, Jean Card, had an opinion piece published in the Missouri Times that’s filled with untruths and attacks the JustMoms organization. Her business website www.jeancardink.com, lists “Persuasive op eds and letters to the editor” first in services she offers.

If this is what Republic Services is doing in the light of day, I worry about what it is doing behind the scenes. Lobbyists must be exerting strong pressure on Pruitt to choose capping. So what can St. Louisans do? First, recognize this problem is a threat to the entire region, not just to those who live near the landfill. Second, call Scott Pruitt at 202-564-4700. Tell him not to listen to the Republic Services lobbyists who must be knocking at his door. Let him know the only reasonable solution is to remove the waste.

Dr. Stuart Slavin is a professor of pediatrics at St. Louis University School of Medicine.