

INFORMATION UTILIZATION IN THE FORMULATION OF HAZARDOUS WASTE FACILITY
SITING REGULATIONS: A METHOD OF RESEARCH FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The demand for siting new hazardous waste disposal facilities has grown nationally during the past decade while opposition to these facilities has also increased. At the heart of this controversy is the issue of risk. The meaning of risk in this context is subject to various interpretations. The task of resolving these controversies has been left to the states. This paper discusses the problem of defining risk in the context of hazardous waste facility siting regulations, and proposes a method of research for analyzing the process by which risk is defined and the implications of this process for organizational learning.

KEY WORDS: Defining Risk, Risk Acceptability, Organizational Learning,
Hazardous Waste Facility Siting

INTRODUCTION

The problem of hazardous waste management has frequently been referred to as "the single most threatening environmental issue facing the country," (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1982:8) or the "environmental problem of the century" (Epstein et al., 1982:37). These characterizations of the problem are an acknowledgment of a serious predicament which this issue poses for a modern industrial society. On the one hand, society has come to depend on products and processes which require the ever-increasing use of complex and dangerous chemicals that must somehow be safely disposed of after they are no longer useful. However, in spite of the increasing demand each year for new hazardous waste disposal facilities (HWDF) to be built, there has been continuous opposition to the location of these facilities in almost every community across the nation.

At the heart of this siting controversy is the issue of the risks posed by these facilities to the communities in which they would be housed. The meaning of the concept of risk in this context is subject to various interpretations by all those who have a stake in the outcome of the decision. In particular, there have been disagreements over the proper boundaries of the risk debate (that is, the breadth and nature of risk in this context), as well as disagreements about what is an acceptable level of risk for a community to bear from these facilities.