

# International environmental protection : forerunner Switzerland

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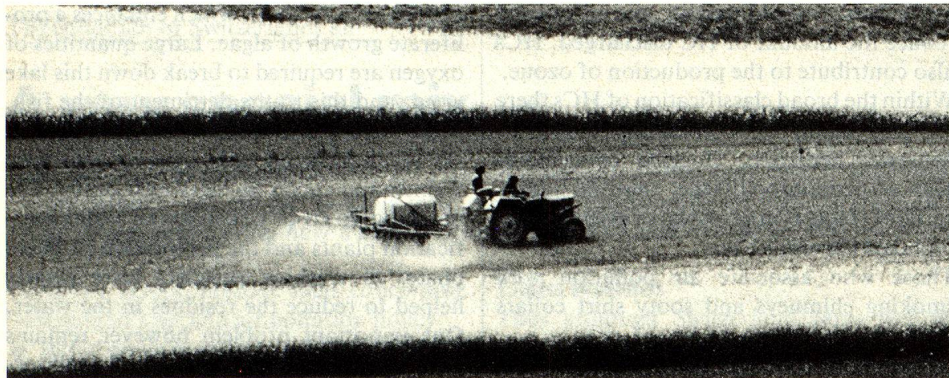
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Pesticides used for agriculture burden soil and water. (Photo: Peter Studer)

particles in the soil. Absorbed by the plants, these harmful substances find their way back onto our plates through the food chain.

#### Our soil – the big unknown

Whilst the health of our water has been concerning us for over a quarter of a century, the necessity to protect our soil from pollution has only been preoccupying us in recent years: We have become particularly

aware of the condition of our soil through the forest deaths. Ever since the forest has been showing signs of an overall and treacherous illness, there have been fears that wide areas of forest could die and disappear. The «Ordinance for harmful materials in the earth» which has been in force for two years, is an important step towards putting the 1983 Law for the Protection of the Environment in the area of soil fertility into effect.

This Ordinance lays down set limits for certain harmful materials and in addition establishes the legal basis for a surveillance system. This is in the development stage at the moment and consists of a national net of ground observation stations known as NABO. Not to be forgotten are also the efforts being made by scientists in this area within the framework of national research projects. We actually know very little about this vital part of our environment, which, contrary to all appearances, is really teeming with life: every square metre of ground contains 2½ kilos of living organisms – of which 1 kilo of toadstools, 1 kilo of bacteria and 200 grams of earthworms. The protection of this part of the environment, which may not appear all that spectacular, is absolutely vital. The problems may be only too difficult to solve, but they must be solved at all cost. The Swiss Society for the Protection of the Environment has tried to put this fact into words in the form of a warning in which the main message is: Water can be purified, air filtered but how are we to «clean» our poisoned soils?

Jean-Jacques Daetwyler

#### International Environmental Protection

## Forerunner Switzerland

*Switzerland has always been reproached for going out on its own whenever it has introduced regulations in the interest of the environment, stricter than those being enforced in the rest of Europe. At the same time Switzerland has engaged itself avidly in an intensification and harmonisation of international environmental protection measures over the past few years.*

Switzerland was one of the leading forces in the drafting of the Geneva Convention on long-range transboundary air pollution and for the three protocols which put the convention into concrete terms. The latter concerned themselves with the financing of a European measuring and evaluation system for air pollution (EMEP) as well as with the reduction of sulphur and nitrogen emissions. Switzerland was equally involved in last years conclusion of the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances. The aim of this protocol is to reduce the production and usage of fluoride hydrocarbons which according to scientific findings are responsible for the ever increasing hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic.

Switzerland, together with the Netherlands, was the joint instigator of last years meeting of the Ministers of the Environment of the European Economic Community (EEC),

the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the EEC-Commission. It was decided at this meeting that a formula should be drawn up to organise the cooperation between the EEC and EFTA States as well as the EEC-Commission in matters concerning the environment. The long term goal is a common European environmental policy.

#### Risky Waste Tourism

The endeavours to draw up an international regulation for the export of dangerous wastes date back to an initiative taken by Federal Councillor Egli at a Geneva Conference in 1983. This initiative followed the criss-cross journey the Dioxine barrels from Seveso made through the whole of Europe. A Conference of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) at minister level held in Basle at the

invitation of Switzerland in 1985 concluded that an effective observation and control system for international transport of hazardous wastes should be prepared, together with a legally binding treaty. This should be ready for signature by the end of this year. In the meantime the governing council of the PNUE (United Nations Environment Programme) has decided, on the initiative of Switzerland and Hungary, to negotiate a global control system. This is being prepared by a group of experts with a Swiss as chairman. The treaty bases itself closely on the OECD system and has the following principles:

- The production of dangerous wastes should not only be kept to a limit wherever possible – their import and export should also be kept to a minimum, providing this has no detrimental effect on an efficient, rational and environmentally justifiable waste management.

- Those exports which are nonetheless imperative are to be subjected to a strict control system from start to finish. All exports must be registered with the exporting and importing countries before they are undertaken. Transportation may only then begin when all the States involved have given their consent. The authorities of an exporting country is to refuse consent should there be any doubt as to the safety of



the transportation or an environmentally correct waste management. The consent of the importing country should have no influence on this decision.

– The types of waste which are to come under the auspices of the treaty are to be stated in a list.

A diplomatic conference will take place in Basle on 20th and 21st March 1989 at Switzerland's invitation. This conference is to work over the global treaty and to agree on and sign the final version. The conference will most probably be presided over by Federal Councillor Cotti. *MZ*

## New Waste Model

# End of the Head in the Sand Policy

*Reports about special wastes for which there is at present no refuse site or incineration plant, and which can hardly be exported, as well as reports of real emergency situations in many areas for the disposal of «normal» household refuse, are becoming increasingly common even in Switzerland. How is the refuse mountain to be dealt with?*

The problem lies on the one hand with the ever growing volume of waste over the past few years: The national average of household refuse annually per head is transpired to be 400 kilos – three times that at the end of the '50s; to this can be added (also annually per head) about 50 kilos of special wastes, over 600 kilos of rubble and excavated material as well as 500 kilos of sewage sludge.

Aside from the sheer amount, the increasing «chemicalisation» of the waste is also a problem. The increased usage of synthetic materials, organic lubricants and solvents, heavy metals and other «problem materials» has meant that the amount of substances which could potentially damage the environment has steadily increased in waste too.

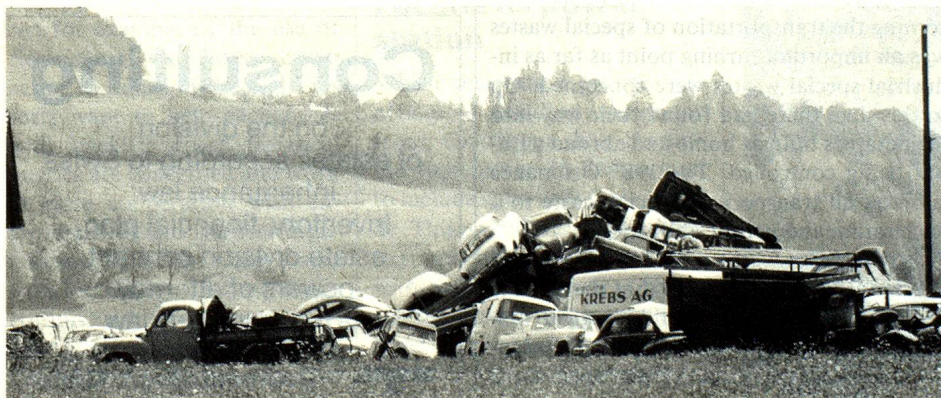
## Where do we stand?

About three dozen refuse incineration depots constitute the hardcore of Switzerland's waste management today. These were generally constructed between 1955 and 1975, under the auspices of the local authorities.

These depots have just about managed to keep the volume of the waste mountain at bay. However many problems remain unsolved on the quality side. One fact was kept concealed for a long time – namely that a considerable amount of harmful materials remained in the slag, the filter dust and the exhaust air.

Alongside the incineration depots which burn about 80 per cent of household refuse, there are only a few individual depots in Switzerland which can commercially handle or rather recycle special waste materials. We can mention the following: Compost plants which handle the «green wastes» collected separately in certain regions; the industrial plants which handle paper, glass and metal recycling; various plants which specialize in the separation of oil, fats and solvents from sewage and finally individual centres in the construction and development stages for the sorting and preconditioning of special wastes.

The depots, besides the transporters, who bundle off the masses of unwanted materials abroad, form the last link in the



*Out of sight, out of mind? The reconstruction of unsuitable waste depots takes years and costs an enormous amount. (Photo: Peter Studer)*

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