2. REGARDING THE INCINERATION OF HAZARDOUS WASTE AT SEA

Background

The United States faces a serious problem in finding and utilizing safe, environmentally sound methods for the disposal of hazardous wastes. New legislative and regulatory initiatives are forcing generators of this material to utilize more technological methods of disposal, turning away from long-term storage options, such as landfills and injection wells, which have been predominantly utilized in the past.

In the opinion of most scientific experts, incineration is the best method of disposing of those hazardous wastes which can be burned. But, according to the EPA Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation, the United States will face a shortfall of incineration capacity if the 1984 amendments to the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) are properly implemented. This shortfall, equal to 1.64 million tons/year of capacity, is equivalent to seven and a half times the nation's existing commercial capacity for hazardous waste incineration.

Incineration of hazardous wastes can be done both on land or at sea. The major distinction lies in the fact that, with incineration at sea, complete destruction of these dangerous materials takes place far from communities where people live and work. In fact, in March 1985, EPA released a report which demonstrated that potential risk to human health from ocean incineration is 30-40 times less than from land-based incineration of hazardous wastes.

Incineration of hazardous wastes at sea has been used commercially since 1969 in Europe to destroy a wide variety of complex liquid organic materials. Studies by EPA in American waters have demonstrated that ocean incineration is safe and environmentally sound. A panel, composed of the EPA, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Maritime Administration, and the National Bureau of Standards, determined that ocean incineration is a thoroughly safe technology for the permanent destruction of hazardous liquid wastes and encourage its development by U.S. industry.

EPA's Science Advisory Board recently completed a thorough evaluation of the available data on the incineration of hazardous wastes. The Board concluded that no human health or environmental impacts resulting from ocean incineration have been detected and that there were no valid technical reasons to postpone development and commercialization of ocean incineration in the United States.
Recommendation

The Southern Legislative Conference recognizes that a variety of methods must be utilized to properly dispose of the hazardous wastes generated in the United States. These include source reduction, resource recovery and high technology treatment methods such as incineration. Clearly, based on federal projections, the nation cannot continue to delay using new, available technologies and must encourage their use and further development.

Both land-based and at-sea incineration will be needed to dispose of that portion of hazardous wastes which is incinerable. Land-based incineration is more suitable for solid, incinerable materials, while ocean incineration is more appropriate for liquids.

The Southern Legislative Conference recognizes the public and political sensitivities surrounding the problem of hazardous waste disposal and urges elected officials to look beyond special interests toward the solution of the greater national problem. With approximately 45% of the liquid hazardous wastes produced nationally being generated in the fifteen member states represented by SLC, it is obvious that ocean incineration must be made available to generators of these wastes in the region.

The Southern Legislative Conference urges the EPA to revitalize its efforts and expeditiously move to enable competitive commercialization of ocean incineration by developing the comprehensive regulations needed to guide EPA evaluations of permit applications for further research burns.