

## Interview

# Matthew Wilson

## Director, Toxics Action Center

*Matthew Wilson has served as Director of the Toxics Action Center since 1989. The center assists local groups in Massachusetts and Connecticut fighting environmental and health hazards in their communities.*

### **How did you first get involved in toxics issues?**

Back in 1986, I started working with a coalition of groups in Massachusetts who got together and put a question on the ballot to speed the cleanup of toxic waste sites here in the state and better involve the public in the cleanup of those sites. The voters passed the initiative 74-26%, creating one of the most comprehensive cleanup laws in the nation.

At that time in 1986, there were only about 300 or 400 toxic waste sites recognized in the state; now there are 6,000 or 7,000. So obviously we helped raise the profile of the issue, but we also forced the state to go out and identify the sites that we knew were out there but that they weren't looking for.

### **What types of projects does the center work on these days?**

We're always helping communities fight to clean up hazardous waste. But we also assist local groups in campaigns to block unsafe waste facilities like incinerators from being built. And we work to prevent pollution in the first place by helping citizens

pressure companies to reduce their use of toxic chemicals.

### **What types of environmental problems have you seen over the years?**

Over the last 11 years the center has helped 200 neighborhood groups address a multitude of environmental threats. The most compelling problems I've seen are the ones that directly affect people's health—contaminated groundwater supplies or air pollution from toxic waste facilities or chemical companies that have brought cancer and respiratory problems into different communities. These are the neighborhoods that are literally right next to a dump site or an unsafe waste facility.

But more and more, we're working with people who realize that these toxic threats affect more than just the immediate neighborhood.

An incinerator, for example, emits mercury or dioxins that can migrate for hundreds of miles. So it doesn't matter whether you live next to the smokestack—the stuff is on the grass and cows eat it and chickens eat it and it passes up the food chain.

When the center started up 11 years ago, we mostly heard citizens saying "not in my backyard." Nowadays, we hear "not in anyone's backyard."



### **How will the recent funding of the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board affect your work to prevent pollution and clean up hazardous waste sites?**

It's always good to identify and publicize chemical accidents, to call companies on the carpet so that they don't do it again and so that others learn from the mistakes and take precautions. But the only way we can truly prevent accidents from happening again is by reducing our use of these dangerous chemicals.

From our perspective, the work that we do is divided into what has happened in the past and what we're going to have to deal with in the future. Cleaning up toxic waste sites is incredibly costly. It's a process that takes a really long time, affecting the community's drinking water, the soil, the health and development of the town.

Our focus needs to be on pollution prevention—it not only saves lives, but financially, it just makes sense. ♦

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