

On My Mind

7/6/01

As though a dam had given way, there appeared this week a veritable flood of information from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) regarding next steps in cleaning up Tanapag village's PCB-contaminated soil. There also is what appears to be a change in tune. No longer is the ACE saying that it has already chosen which method of disposal it will use - as it did in its May 31 news release - and on which last week's comments were based. Now the language has softened somewhat, with the ACE saying that while it does have a preference among the ten alternatives it analyzed, it will await public comment as well as review by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before making its final decision.

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However, a closer look at the ACE Focused Feasibility Study - in which the alternatives are examined - reveals that there are, in reality, only five alternatives offered. A sixth alternative is "no action," which was included as a point of comparison, but is not, after all, a realistic option. And four of the alternatives are merely different versions of the two-step process initially proposed by ACE: the use of indirect thermal desorption to remove the PCBs from the soil, and something called Fenton's reaction to "detoxify" the residual PCB sludge. Where they differ is in the second step; they all begin with indirect thermal desorption.

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And, in fact, the ACE is apparently so committed to indirect thermal desorption that it has already issued a detailed (draft) work plan describing the procedures to be followed in applying the method to Tanapag's PCB stockpile.

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However, given the shift in rhetoric, perhaps the public meeting at which the ACE hopes to solicit public opinion will not be quite as tempestuous as first forecast.

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Maybe the Visitors' Authority and the Commonwealth Ports Authority should exchange directors, or board members, or board chairmen, or staff - or, even, all of the aforementioned. It would appear that the Visitors' Authority - struggling, with little apparent success, to find ways to entice more tourists to the CNMI - could make good use of the creativity and persistence being exercised by the Ports Authority in its successful efforts to find new sources of revenue.

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First, the Ports Authority installed paid parking at the airport. Then it installed paid parking at the commuter port. Then it installed paid parking at the seaport. Of course, none of this was very popular with the community, but the Ports Authority has, single-mindedly, persisted. And the effort has paid off. Revenue for the Ports Authority has increased considerably. Enough, in fact, that the Ports Authority has even relented a little - and now allows a fifteen minute grace period to allow those only loading and unloading passengers at the seaport to go through the gate at no charge.

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Now the Ports Authority is proposing installing gambling machines in the departure area of public airports and seaports throughout the Commonwealth, in an effort to raise even more funds.

In fact, its plans go further. It is also proposing to offer kiddie rides and jukeboxes and, according to a story in Wednesday's <I>Variety</I>, "coin-operated music producing machines" - whatever they are - in those areas as well. According to the paper, the proposals are contained in a bill submitted to the Senate by Ports Authority Director Carlos H. Salas.

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While poker machines are readily accessible throughout the CNMI, pushing them in the tourists' faces, so to speak, might not sit so well. The CNMI has enough problems convincing tourists that this is a clean, safe, family-oriented place. Placing electronic poker machines, poker slot machines and pachinko slot machines in their path - much as Duty Free places its goods in their path as they prepare to leave - doesn't exactly support such a picture.

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Nor does the idea of canned music sound particularly appealing. It is one thing to offer, as background music, traditional island music. It is quite another to indiscriminately broadcast hard rock. The competition with the already incomprehensible loudspeaker announcements will only give everyone a headache.

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But at least the Ports Authority is trying. Its search for additional funding is boundless, imaginative, relentless. And it is getting results. Which is more than can be said for the Visitors Authority.

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For example: another opportunity for tourist activity in case of bad weather - as this column was discussing two weeks ago - is the CNMI's new Hollywood Theatres complex. Yet one sees very few tourists there. The lack of foreign sub-titles on the films may explain this in part. But how hard would it be to try work with the distributor and bring in films that do have Japanese (or Chinese, or Korean, for that matter) sub-titles? There'd be no point in importing Asian-language films per se, since presumably, the tourists can see those at home.

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Offering the Asian tourist an opportunity to see foreign (i.e., American) films but in a format that they can understand could be a considerable attraction. Presumably, admission charges here would also be less expensive than would watching American films with Asian subtitles in their own country. And attracting tourists to the theatre complex would have a "fringe" benefit of boosting the local economy as well - providing more jobs, generating more tax revenue, creating all the other ripple effects such increased tourism spending generates.

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Granted, bringing such films to the CNMI might involve some costs, but surely would bring a better return than continuing to throw money away promoting irrelevant Saipanda commercials. Regrettably, there is little doubt that MVA, with its myopic vision, ever considered such a thing.....

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This came from a friend. Since it fits so well with much of what this column is all about - and is clever besides - it is reprinted herewith. It is datelined Los Alamos, New Mexico.

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The fire at Los Alamos has one significant consequence. A secret scientific document was discovered in a bunker whose security systems were mostly destroyed by the fire. This document was leaked to the public last weekend.

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Actually it reveals nothing that we didn't already suspect. But it does show that the government has known all along that besides arsenic, lead, mercury, radon, strontium and plutonium, one more extremely deadly and pervasive element also exists.

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Investigators at a major research institution have discovered the heaviest element known to science. This startling new discovery has been tentatively named Governmentium (Gv) but kept top secret for 50 years. This new element has no protons or electrons, thus having an atomic number of 0. It does, however, have 1 neutron, 125 deputy neutrons, 75 supervisory neutrons, and 111 team leader neutrons, giving it an atomic mass of 312.

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These 312 particles are held together by a force called morons, which are surrounded by vast quantities of lepton-like particles called peons. Since it has no electrons, Governmentium is inert. However, it can be detected as it impedes every reaction with which it comes into contact.

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According to the discoverers, a minute amount of Governmentium causes one reaction to take over four days to complete when it would normally take less than a second. Governmentium has a normal half-life of approximately three years; it does not decay but instead undergoes a reorganization in which a portion of the deputy neutrons, supervisory neutrons, and team leader neutrons exchange places.

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In fact, a Governmentium sample's mass will actually increase over time, since with each reorganization some of the morons inevitably become neutrons, forming new isotopes. This characteristic of moron promotion leads some scientists to speculate that Governmentium is formed whenever morons reach a certain quantity in concentration. This hypothetical quantity is referred to as the "Critical Morass."

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All of which goes to prove - among other things - that knowledge of even a smattering of chemistry has its uses.