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Illegal dumpers jailed by lawman

Publicizes guilty firms

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The days when a tough-talking lawman rides out of the sunset to clean up a Western town are gone. But don't tell Barry Groveman.

The 31-year-old Long Island native may not have Gary Cooper's accent, but as head of the district attorney's toxic waste strike force, his duty is to clean up the town.

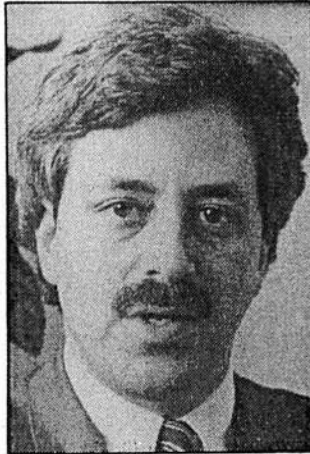
Instead of putting cattle rustlers behind bars, he is slamming the jailhouse door on white collar executives. Nearly a dozen executives whose companies illegally dumped toxic wastes have been jailed in the past three years.

Groveman's team of fire, police and health officials have discovered plating and manufacturing companies that were dumping cyanide into the sewers, a manufacturer who secretly buried 14,000 gallons of caustic chemicals next to the railroad tracks, and a salvage operator that was dumping cancer-causing PCBs on the ground.

Groveman has publicized the cases unabashedly, calling press conferences to announce convictions, and forcing some guilty companies to place full-page newspaper ads admitting culpability.

"We're going to equate illegal dumping with the sound of the jail door slamming," Groveman said. "A fine will not work. A fine will always be the cost of doing business. Jail will not be the cost of doing business, and so

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BARRY GROVEMAN
Heads strike force

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the objective was always to make these jail offences."

Groveman's approach has brought charges of grandstanding from critics, all of whom asked not to be identified. But supporters said the tough tactics are needed at a time when stringent laws regulating hazardous wastes have increased the incentives for "midnight dumping."

"He's a little bit difficult to get along with, but he gets the job done," said Douglas Steele, the county health department's hazardous materials coordinator.

Groveman said he talks tough because he has a tough job.

"We're not talking about accidental spills. We're talking about people that build (toxic) pipelines where you can't see them; people who wait until dark to haul cyanide wastes 50 miles into the forest and dump it; people who dig cavernous holes in the ground and bury hundreds of barrels of toxic wastes and hope nobody finds them."

Groveman's message was brought home clearly last week to American Castor Corp., which not only had its top two executives jailed for toxic dumping, but also was required to place a full-page newspaper ad publicizing the crime.

Groveman originated the idea of a toxic waste strike force in 1981 when he was a city prosecutor. He organized a team of fire, police, health officials and prosecutors.

The city strike force was successful, he said, but budget cuts forced Groveman to keep the staff small and act as the sole prosecutor.

Then, in November, Los Angeles City Attorney Ira Reiner was elected district attorney and promptly hired Groveman to set up a larger task force on the county level.

Now the expanded staff has four investigators and six attorneys, Groveman said. And, with a new law passed Jan. 1 making illegal toxic dumping a felony instead of a misdemeanor, some tough sentences will be meted out, he said.

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