



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Suspected Hazardous Waste (adapted from NSPE Case No. 92-6)

Year

1999

Description

A supervisor instructs a student engineer to withhold information from a client about the suspected nature of waste on the client's property to protect what the supervisor takes to be the client's interest.

Body

Alex is an engineering student employed for the summer by Environmental Engineering, a consulting firm. RJ, the engineer who supervises Alex, directs Alex to sample the contents of drums located on the property of a client. From the look and smell of the drums, Alex believes that analysis of the sample will show hazardous waste in the drums. Alex knows that if the material contains hazardous waste, there are legal requirements for the transport and disposal of the drums, and that federal and state authorities must be notified.

Alex informs RJ of the likely contents of the samples and asks what to do next. RJ instructs him to report only that samples have been taken, and not to do the analysis. Since the client is a major one for Environmental Engineering, RJ proposes to report to the client only where the drums are located and that they contain questionable material, and to suggest that they be removed.

Note that it is much more expensive to dispose of hazardous waste than conventional waste. Many states have laws requiring environmental engineers to report any evidence of a "release" of hazardous materials. (Any presence of hazardous material in other than its intended placement for use and storage counts as "release".)

Does RJ fulfill an engineer's professional responsibilities by informing the client only of the presence of the drums and withholding more specific information on their contents?

What can and should Alex, a student and a summer hire, do in this situation?

[NSPE Code of Ethics](#) An earlier version may have been used in this case.

Notes

See the original NSPE case at: [Hazardous Waste - Case No. 92-6](#).

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Professional Ethics in Engineering Practice: Discussion Cases Based on NSPE BER Cases

Topics

Catastrophes, Hazards, Disasters

Confidentiality

Employer/Employee Relationships

Engineer/Client Relationships

Environmental Justice

Law and Public Policy

Public Health and Safety

Public Well-being

Safety

Social Responsibility

Sustainability

Workplace Ethics

Discipline(s)

Chemical Engineering

Engineering

Environmental Engineering

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