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A remote Eskimo village hugging the rim of the Arctic Ocean has become a proving ground for the Federal Government's national environmental policy.

The Village of Barrow, Alaska, located in the last reaches of civilization on the North American Continent, over the last half century has had tons of garbage laid on its doorstep - - much of it from government agencies.

The residue of garbage began accumulating in quantities in the 1940· s with the Navy's exploration for oil, and was accelerated during construction of the DEW line by the Air Force. - Added to this were the day-to-day waste of a population sustaining life in a harsh, forbidding climate, without the benefits of modern water and sewage systems. Empty oil drums became useful, and ultimately necessary, to control waste.

For many years, nothing was ever done about it because no one seemed to mind and government agencies were always short of money when it carne to making cleanup funds available.

But with the stirring of national conscience about pollution and a change in public policy, logistic requirements for cleaning up Barrow and its environs escalated into a full- scale battle plan.

Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton pointed out that President Nixon -- in his environmental messages to the Congress has called for the marshalling of various forces to curb pollution.

President Nixon has said that, while State and local governments, consumers, industry and private organizations have primary responsibility for protecting the environment, the Federal Government must exercise effective leadership to assist these groups. Providing leadership for the Barrow cleanup, Secretary Morton said, was in line with the Presidents objectives.

Visiting the area in July 1971, Secretary Morton was appalled at seeing acres of oil drums, broken-down machinery and other junk, along with animal carcasses, and human and household waste littering the landscape around Barrow.

Morton decided action must be taken quickly to change Barrow's pollution plight. He made the Barrow cleanup a special project and placed William L. Rogers, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, in charge.

In September 1971 Rogers, accompanied by James H. Isbell, a consultant named to coordinate agency efforts at Barrow, met with Navy Captain Emory Smith, Director of the Office of Naval Petroleum and Oil Shale Reserve, and others to discuss plans for the cleanup.

From the records it was evident that much thought, talk, and planning already had been given to a cleanup program. Of paramount importance was the fact that agreement had been reached on geographic areas of responsibility among the Office of Naval Research, the Office of Naval Petroleum and Oil Shale Reserve, the State Division of Aviation, and the Village of Barrow.

Secretary Morton enlisted the support of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Alaska Governor William Egan.

But the Village of Barrow faced a critical problem - - no money. The Village Council acknowledged its responsibility, but without money the task appeared impossible.

One source was money Congress made available to all States in the Emergency Employment Act of 1971. With its high rate of unemployment, Barrow was allocated $28,800 -- enough to employ 20 men for more than 10 weeks. In other legislation, Congress made funds available for cleaning up Indian Reservations and the Village became eligible for another $25, 000. Finally, the Bureau of Indian Affairs redirected some of its resources to remove an old gas line which had been abandoned in place some seven years before. That gas line had some 4, 000 empty oil drums holding it above the tundra.

In February of 1972, the job was about two-thirds finished. More than 12,000 oil drums which had been used for household waste were removed from the tundra southwest of the Village. Most of the old pipeline was stacked neatly in a storage area and its supporting oil drums are gone.

Where is Barrow's trash going? Part of it is being used in an erosion control project southwest of the Village. A ravine which has developed through the years is being filled and at the end will be topped with two or three feet of earth so that the drainage will flow in another direction during spring "breakup.”

A shallow lagoon, half way between Barrow and the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, has been used as a sanitary land fill for many years and its use continues.

The Department of the Interior asked both the Environmental Protection Agency and Alaska’s Commissioner of Environmental Conservation for their respective views on using those areas for trash disposal. Both concurred. Since the permafrost extends from the surface down to a level of 1,300 feet, anything buried to a depth of two or more feet becomes permanently frozen; contamination of other areas will not occur.

The Navy responded to Secretary Laird's call for action by sending a 20 -man all-volunteer force of Seabees to begin the cleanup at Navy Arctic Research Lab last October. The Navy renewed its effective effort in the spring of 1972.

But once clean, will it stay that way? Things are being done on this score also.

Secretary Morton, Deputy Assistant Secretary Rogers, and Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., Chief of Naval Operations, did the pre-game planning and Alaska's Congressional delegation carried the ball to get funds for a new incinerator which, about a year from now, will serve both the Arctic Research Lab and the Village of Barrow. It will be used for both liquid and solid waste.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development is sponsoring construction of 100 new homes in Barrow. One of HUD’s requirements is that a modern water and sewage system be designed for the entire village. Interior's BIA school and the Native Health Service Hospital are already served by modern sewage systems.