

DANGER: CHEMICAL WASTE

While the University waits for a chemical waste disposal facility to be built, conditions deteriorate at the present storage site

A radioactive and chemical waste disposal facility will be a welcome addition to the University's Office of Environmental Health — one of these days.

The facility can't be built a moment too soon, according to chemist Craig Reece, the man in charge of disposal of all chemical waste at the University.

In fact, Reece plans to send letters to the state Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency citing potentially hazardous conditions of the University's current chemical waste disposal area.

Reece says he sent a memo nearly eight months ago describing the conditions of the disposal area — a loading dock facing Franklin Boulevard behind Science II — to Public Safety Director Oakley Glenn. He says he never received a response.

"Nothing's ever been done, and I don't think anything ever will be," Reece says.

"I'm complaining to agencies because I don't have faith the University will correct the problem without pressure."

The loading dock where Reece prepares 55 to 70 gallons of chemical wastes a month for transfer to Arlington (Oregon's only chemical waste disposal site), is situated next to an intake vent that supplies air directly to the teaching labs and library in the basement of Science II.

Reece says he knows of at least two instances in which fumes from chemicals he was working with on the dock drifted into the research labs, causing people to evacuate the building.

"If there were ever a fire, smoke will go right into the building," Reece says.

A storm sewer drain lying in front of a flimsy chemical storage cage

on the loading dock would cause "an immediate environmental problem" in the case of an accidental spill, according to Reece.

"The drains lead directly into the mirrace," he says.

According to state regulations, Reece must allow empty bottles in which chemicals have been stored to ventilate for five to eight days before feeding them to a glass crusher.

Due to the lack of a proper facility, Reece must simply leave the bottles unattended on the loading dock.

Sometimes, he says, people who don't know better take the bottles.

A large black drum labeled "sulfuric acid" that is too large to fit in the existing storage cage also sits on the dock. Reece says he's never received the additional cages he requested to correct the problem.

At best, Reece says, the area is an eyesore. It serves as a major thoroughfare for delivery trucks and students who seek access to Science II.

"It smells bad and looks terrible," he says.

But Reece says he envisions something much more serious.

"If there were an accident out there it would be a disaster. If some fanatic decided to put a bullet hole through one of those drums

"if someone wanted to, they could cause a real problem."

Chemical Stores Manager David Senkovich agrees that the present situation is "potentially dangerous."

"The (new) building doesn't seem to be getting built very fast," Senkovich says. "There needs to be an adequate facility — and the sooner the better."

But Senkovich maintains that University personnel in charge of waste management face the most danger, and Reece couldn't agree

more.

He complains that he gets little or no response to requests for supplies he considers vital to his safety. For instance, in working so closely with noxious and sometimes carcinogenic chemicals, he says he often experiences nausea because of improper ventilating equipment.

Even less expensive items — such as gloves and spill-control cloths — never get ordered.

"We don't have anything to clean up a spill," says Reece. "I don't even have a water hose available. If someone spills something, it's tough. All we can do is let it evaporate."

But Safety Director Glenn says money is the main problem. The waste disposal program's budget comes under his department, and Glenn says he has responded to supply requests to the largest extent possible.

The things we haven't had money to buy are relatively minor," he says. "Naturally those things you're going to have to get along without, if you're going to take care of the larger, more important things."

Besides, Glenn contends, the supplies Reece orders "have never been there before, and no one's ever come down with anything."

Glenn isn't willing to say the loading dock poses a potential hazard.

"It's been there in the same way since 1950," he says, "and I don't remember incidents where anything occurred."

"I think the way (the waste disposal site) is set up now is the best we can do at the present time, and until the buildings are completed, I don't think it will be changed."

As for Reece's claim that existing disposal conditions are dangerous, Glenn counters that



there's simply no way around the fact that waste disposal is a hazardous business.

Reece doesn't argue. "No matter how you look at it, it's risky stuff — that's why I don't like doing it on the loading dock," he says.

"I knew I was taking risks by getting into waste disposal," Reece continues, "but I didn't know it would be like this."

According to University Planner David Rowe, the new radiation and chemical disposal facility has been plagued with several delays over the last five years.

Although it was supposed to be built by November 1981, design plans haven't even been approved

yet. Construction won't begin until fall, at the earliest, and the job probably won't be finished until late winter or early spring.

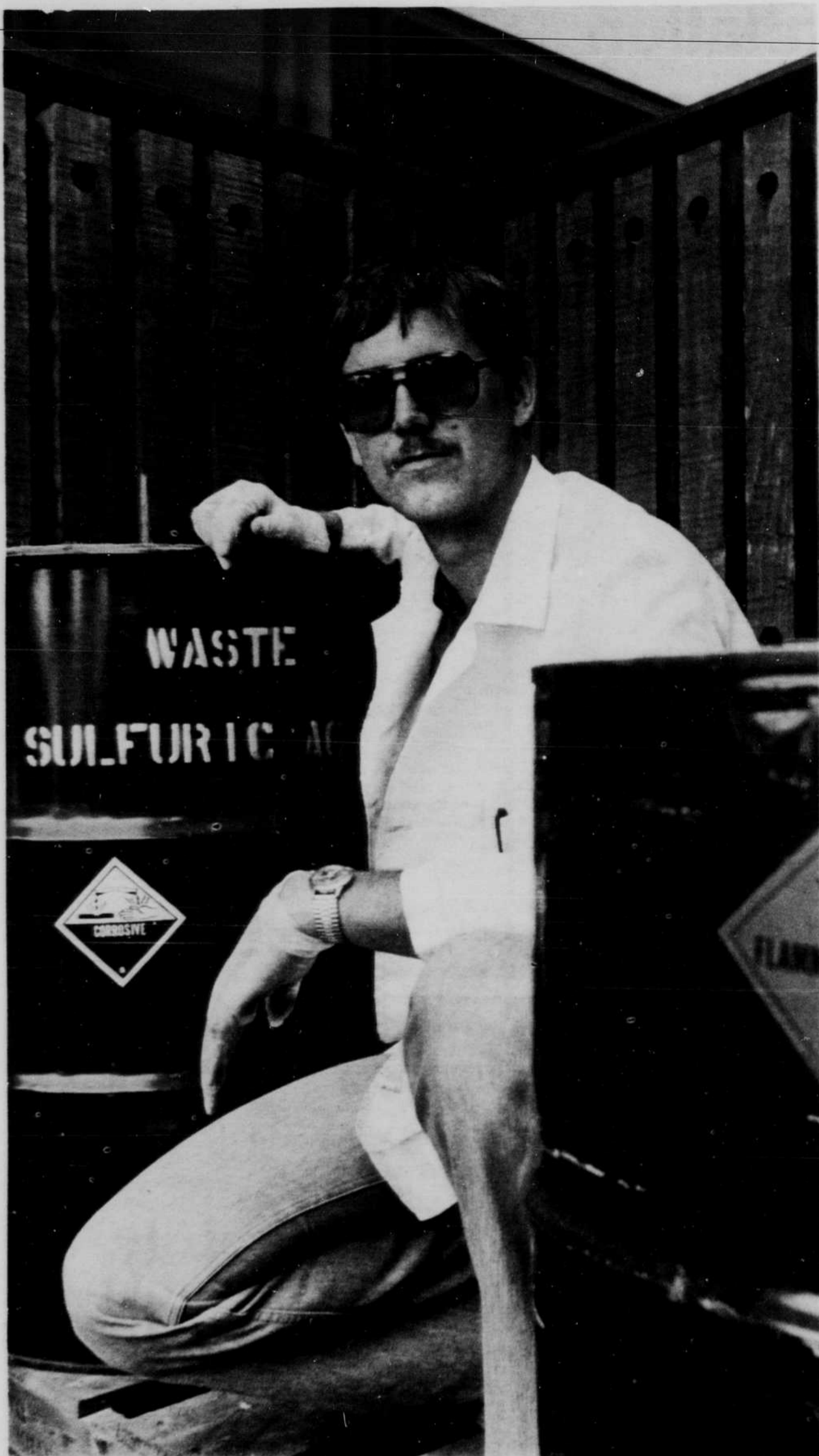
With a budget of only \$200,000, "it's going to be tight," Rowe says.

But according to him, "The extent of danger is not of scandalous proportions. It's present, and it needs to be dealt with, but it will be with this building."

"The proposed building is excellent," Reece says. "It will be one of the best in the nation."

He says he just wants it built.

Story by Heidi Swilling
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