

WHAT'S ON | Corporations come out losers in documentary on Woburn's toxic waste

'NOVA' puts industries on trial

GREG DAWSON

W.R. GRACE and Beatrice Foods did not want potential jurors in the Woburn toxic pollution trial to see tonight's "NOVA" (8-9, Channel 2), and it's easy to see why.

"Toxic Trials" is the story of two companies trying to weasel their way out of alleged responsibility for contaminated well water that apparently caused high rates of leukemia in a Woburn neighborhood — trying and failing, to my eyes.

The companies persuaded the U.S. District Court last September to impose a gag order that prohibited both sides from making public statements about the case and also would have blocked production of "Toxic Trials." Judge Walter Skinner lifted the restriction and allowed "NOVA" access to embargoed material, on the condition that "Toxic Trials" not be shown till this week.

Last week a jury was finally empaneled, and the lawsuit brought by eight Woburn families is expected to get under way next week and drag on for several months. The companies, employing what might be called the American Tobacco Institute Defense, say there is no scientific proof that the highly toxic chemicals that found their way into Woburn wells cause leukemia.

Indeed, *direct* cause and effect is hard to prove, attorneys for the families admit. All they can show is a "positive association" between a cluster of leukemia cases in an east Woburn neighborhood and the presence of toxic chemical solvents in the water.

They think it's no coincidence that across town in west Woburn, served by different wells, there was no such outbreak of leukemia among children.

The companies will trot out



BURDEN OF PROOF: 'NOVA' examines toxic waste in Woburn. Above, Anne Anderson, whose son Jimmy contracted leukemia.

their own "experts" (the American Industrial Health Council, cousin of the American Tobacco Institute) and find a thousand ways to say it ain't so, but a researcher interviewed in "Toxic Trials" made it sound like a black-and-white issue, so to speak:

"I had a pathology professor who used to say, 'When you hear hoofbeats, you don't think of zebras.' We're hearing hoofbeats up in Woburn, and all the explanations to account for it, as far as I'm concerned, are people saying maybe it's not horses but zebras. Well, I think we know what the zebras are and what the horses are — and I think the horses are contamination of well water in that community."

Meanwhile, W.R. Grace and Beatrice may get their wish that nobody watch "Toxic Trials," at least tonight. It faces tougher odds than General Custer at Little Big Horn, competing at 8 p.m. with the Grammys, the Bruins and the Celtics, to say nothing of "The A-Team" and "Who's the Boss."

Fortunately, this very timely episode of "NOVA" gets two more chances later in the week in less suicidal time slots — 10:30 p.m. Thursday on Channel 44 and 2 p.m. Saturday on Channel 2.

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