

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01 AM APRIL 24, 2006 (PST)

2006 Goldman Environmental Prize Recipient for North America

Craig Williams
Berea, Kentucky



“The record of achievement of the Chemical Weapons Working Group is incredible. Getting alternatives to incineration in place at four sites was remarkable. It was a huge effort by Craig. He deserves the highest grassroots environmental award in America.” - Rufus Kinney, of Families Concerned about Nerve Gas Incineration in Anniston, Alabama.

A Vietnam Veteran Fights a New Battle at Home

A cabinetmaker by trade, 58-year-old Craig E. Williams is a decorated Vietnam War veteran who successfully convinced the Pentagon to stop plans to incinerate stockpiles of chemical weapons stored in multiple locations around the United States. Today, 24,000 tons of obsolete chemical weapons agents are stored in the United States.

Williams started his campaign in 1985 after learning that one of nine weapons stockpiles to be burned was at an Army depot in his community. Worried that incineration would put local citizens and their environment at risk, he built a nationwide grassroots coalition — the Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG) — to demand safe disposal solutions and openness within the Pentagon’s program.

A Lethal Legacy of the Cold War

It was 1985, a year deep into President Reagan’s “Morning in America,” when Williams attended a public meeting and discovered that the Department of Defense, with no public input, had decided to build an incinerator at the Kentucky Blue Grass Army Depot located about eight miles from his home.

Williams decided to speak out against the plan, joining forces with citizens who lived near the other eight proposed weapons incinerators. After almost 10 years of petitioning, Congress agreed in 1993 to delay funding some of the incinerators while calling for a report on safer methods of weapons destruction.

However, the subsequent Army report recommended proceeding with incineration at six of the nine stockpile sites. The report did not address the clear and voluminous evidence presented two years earlier by Williams and the CWWG that not only were there significant technical and environmental problems and huge cost overruns at the incinerators, but that safer alternative disposal methods were available.

Creating Coalitions and Working Within the System

Williams laid out the evidence to Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, who championed Williams’ cause in Congress. It was a major victory for Williams and his allies when the Army announced in 1996 that it would use a safer water-based process to destroy the weapons at the Maryland and Indiana stockpile sites, while suspending funds for incinerators in Colorado and Kentucky.

At about the same time, Williams also played a key role in getting citizens unprecedented access to previously closed-door meetings where military, state and federal government officials decided how to destroy chemical weapons.

Exposing Pentagon Wrongdoing

Even after the Army had officially agreed to alternative weapons disposal at four sites, another agenda was playing out at the Pentagon. Internal documents were leaked to Williams that confirmed the Pentagon was defying Congressional directives and holding up more than \$300 million in federal funds for safe weapons disposal. The plan was to redirect those funds to existing incineration sites that had cost overruns, now up to 1,400 percent. In addition, Williams and CWWG brought forward numerous whistleblowers at the incinerators who reported that fires, chemical agent releases and other dangerous conditions accompanied the burning of weapons at those plants.

Williams gave the internal Defense Department memos to Sen. McConnell, who made personal phone calls to senior defense officials and sponsored legislation mandating that the funds be released. Subsequently, the Pentagon released the \$300-plus million, money that allowed the Colorado and Kentucky sites to safely destroy more than 880,000 chemical weapons.

From Citizen Activist to a Leading Expert on Chemical Weapons

Today, Williams continues working with CWWG member groups and citizens in Oregon, Utah, Alabama and Arkansas, where incinerators currently are destroying chemical weapons. They use legal challenges, media campaigns, citizen organizing and other means to ensure proper agent monitoring, air quality compliance, protection of workers rights and improved communication with the local communities. The CWWG also plays a critical role in the oversight of weapons disposal at the other stockpile sites where alternative technologies are being deployed, thereby assuring the military's accountability and a transparent process.

Williams, a translator in Vietnam, has remained active in veterans groups. He was one of the original group of veterans who formed the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation in 1980. The Foundation, in turn, was one of six organizations that co-founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which was awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

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Recipient Quote:

Name in print: Craig Williams

"We must not leave the health of our families and protection of the world ecology to corporations, governments and military organizations preoccupied with profit, power and armed conquest. Rather, we must take that responsibility into our own hands. It's up to us to come together across cultural and political divides to prevent these military-industrial polluters from degrading the earth and threatening the well-being of our communities for their own selfish interests."

About the Goldman Environmental Prize

The Goldman Environmental Prize allows individuals to continue winning environmental victories against the odds and inspires ordinary people to take extraordinary actions to protect the world. The Goldman Environmental Prize was created in 1990 by civic leaders and philanthropists Richard N. Goldman and his late wife, Rhoda H. Goldman.

The Goldman Environmental Prize winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental organizations and individuals. Prize winners participate in a 10-day tour of San Francisco and Washington, D.C., for an awards

ceremony and presentation, news conferences, media briefings, and meetings with political, public policy and environmental leaders.