

Opinion Piece

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Incinerators are not the answer to the garbage problem; EPR is the answer

(I've asked Jay Arthur to step aside this issue so we can bring you this excellent piece from John Jackson—editor.)

By John Jackson

The drive to burn municipal garbage is catching fire in Ontario.

Some of the largest municipalities in southern Ontario are actively pursuing the option of building energy-from-waste incinerators, and now Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has thrown his support behind the burning of garbage.

York and Durham regional councils have already approved the construction of a shared incinerator. In March they announced five candidate sites for this plant.

Hamilton and Niagara regions are also jointly considering such a facility. A year and a half ago they were poised to approve an incinerator, but a determined push from local citizens' groups stalled the proposal. Instead, on the urging of local activists, Hamilton and Niagara are assessing the potential for higher waste reduction and diversion rates, and the potential of pre-treated, pre-stabilized waste going to landfill.

Halton Region is discussing the possible construction of a gigantic 1.2 million-tonnes-per-year incinerator. Halton dreams of profiting immensely by filling this monster incinerator with garbage from Toronto.

What happened?

Fifteen years ago, the New Democratic government of Ontario led the world by banning the construction of new municipal waste incinerators and the expansion of existing ones. Since then two of the three municipal waste incinerators in Ontario have closed.

In 1995, the Conservative government lifted this ban, but even then incineration did not gain much

traction in Ontario. The only activity was an expansion of the only remaining municipal waste incinerator -- the one in Brampton serving Peel Region.

But in the last few years a vigorous campaign by some municipalities, the plastics industry, and parts of the waste management industry has pushed incineration to the forefront. And the now Liberal government in Ontario has bought into this option. On March 23, the government loosened the environmental assessment requirements for these incinerators to make it easy to get approvals for them. A week later, McGuinty said, "We need to develop these kinds of technologies here."

"The construction of incinerators would reduce producer responsibility."

Energy-from-waste incinerators are being touted as a solution to two crises at once -- the energy crisis and the waste crisis.

But this argument fails to recognize that burning garbage is a very inefficient way to generate energy. Indeed, a waste incinerator generates substantially less energy than would be gained by making new products by recycling those materials instead of burning them. For example, recycling plastics conserves 10 to 26 times the energy generated by burning plastics. It is more appropriate to call them "waste-of-energy" incinerators than "energy-from-waste" incinerators.

Also, the incineration "solution" to the waste crisis is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the crisis. The problem is not a lack of disposal capacity.

What is the real crisis?

In the past six months alone, the Ontario government has approved 45

million tonnes of new landfill capacity. The real waste crisis is one of excess waste generation and of pitifully low waste diversion rates. In 2004, only 22.5 % of solid waste in Ontario was diverted from disposal and the per capita waste generation rate continues to grow. These failures are because more single-use, non-durable products are being pushed upon the public daily as industry fails to assume responsibility for the waste problems their products create.

Citizen activists across Ontario are organizing to stop this misguided and dangerous push for incineration. They are urging the provincial and municipal governments to focus on waste reduction, reuse, recycling and composting instead. Most importantly, these groups are pushing to reduce waste generation by extended producer responsibility programmes that will require manufacturers to make and sell products that will not become garbage. The construction of incinerators would reduce producer responsibility. Why else is the plastics industry one of the main promoters of the incineration option?

(John Jackson of Kitchener has worked on waste issues for the past 30 years and is program director for Great Lakes United, an international citizens coalition dedicated to protecting and restoring the Great Lakes.)

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