

Waste incinerators not the answer to garbage problem

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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 this week Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty threw 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 -- four of them adjacent to the Darlington nuclear power plant along Lake Ontario.

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, prestabilized waste going to landfill instead of building an incinerator.

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, citing the need to protect the Great Lakes from toxic contaminants such as dioxins and furanes and mercury. Since then two of the three municipal waste incinerators in Ontario have closed.

In 1994, 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 environment 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."

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.

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 per cent of solid waste in Ontario was diverted from disposal and the per capita waste generation rate continues to grow.

The proponents of incinerators claim the new breed of incinerators are not problem polluters.

But the industry's own data prove the contrary. Modern incinerators emit mercury at a rate five times higher per unit of electricity generated than coal, and greenhouse gases at a rate substantially higher than coal-fired or natural gas-fired power plants. How ironic that the Ontario government has promised to close down Ontario's coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury emissions, but at the same time is supporting municipal waste incinerators.

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 and to look at a different style of landfilling where only pre-treated and stabilized materials are placed in landfill.

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