

Dangerous to fast-track incinerators, critics warn

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by Eric McGuinness, Hamilton Spectator

Environmental groups across Ontario accuse the province of undermining blue box recycling by making it easier, faster and cheaper for municipalities to win approval for municipal garbage incinerators that produce energy.

Regulations will now require only an environmental screening -- rather than a full assessment -- of incinerators of any size if they also generate electricity.

The change announced by Environment Minister Laurel Broten last Friday afternoon could be significant for Niagara Region and the City of Hamilton, whose consultants say incineration is the best way to dispose of material that can't be recycled or composted.

It could also fast-track plans for an incinerator proposed jointly by York and Durham regions, but won't affect Halton, which already has permission to build an incinerator at its landfill site.

Sierra Legal, the Pembina Institute, Great Lakes United, the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) and the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) call the move outrageous.

Rick Lindgren, a CELA staff lawyer, said late yesterday, "Waste incineration is an environmentally significant activity that should remain fully subject to the rigorous scrutiny and public participation requirements of Ontario's environmental assessment process."

But Broten aide Anne O'Hagan said the change was proposed months ago, was posted for public comment and "is what people want."

NDP critic Peter Tabuns nevertheless said: "Another Friday, another bad environmental decision is released in hopes for no one to notice. Toronto Environmental Alliance ... reports that the incinerators being shopped around right now in Ontario are the same ones that have shaky track records in Japan and Europe, where they breached emission limits, had operational problems that made them too expensive, or both."

CIELAP coincidentally released a report earlier in the day calling for a comprehensive provincial waste-disposal strategy and an independent scientific assessment of incineration technologies.

It said both are needed before more cities and regions follow Peel Region, the only Ontario municipality now running an energy-from-waste incinerator.

It called on the province to develop strict packaging regulations aimed at reducing waste and to make manufacturers manage waste they produce.

It echoes arguments made by Hamilton and Niagara councils, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Niagara-Hamilton WastePlan Joint Working Group.

O'Hagan said she didn't know how Broten would respond to the call for an incineration study, but felt the minister "is on the same page" as CIELAP with regard to packaging and industry responsibility.