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Non-site specific preliminary report says EFW plant in Durham would be safe

Thu Jun 21, 2007

By: By Jennifer Stone

DURHAM -- A generic study on human health or ecological risk indicates an energy-from-waste plant could be built in Durham or York, but authors of the report and councillors are quick to point out a site-specific study would have to be carried out before such a waste management facility is built.

The joint Durham-York Waste Management Committee received the report, completed by consulting group Jacques Whitford, Tuesday.

The report is "certainly ... generic," said Clarington Councillor Charlie Trim, who chairs the committee. A more in-depth study can't be completed until the site -- to be chosen from a short list that has now dwindled to three in Clarington and one in East Gwillimbury, a municipality that has said it won't be a willing host -- is finally selected. That's expected to happen in September.

"It gives a general sense that (EFW) would be worth exploring," said Coun. Trim, likening the process to "going to a general physician, then going to a specialist."

The report looked at an array of chemicals of potential concern, including particulate matter, cadmium, lead, mercury, dioxins and furans, hydrochloric acid, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, and estimated exhaust stack air emissions based largely on values obtained from stack testing of a facility in Brampton.

"Really, this is just a starting point in our minds," said Dr. Chris Ollson, of Jacques Whitford. "After you choose the site and the technology, you have to do a site-specific analysis."

The report did show some potential human health and ecological concerns, but said they were "limited" in number. It assumed the receptors -- people, wildlife, or vegetation -- considered lived full-time at the area where the highest ground level concentration of contaminants was found.

"These included exposure of subsistence farm and First Nations infants and aquatic receptors to dioxin and furans if the concentration being emitted from the stack" was at Ministry of Environment guidelines, said the report. "In addition, methyl mercury posed a potential risk to the First Nations toddler and approached a level of concern for the Belted Kingfisher ...

"These potential estimates of risk were based on a very conservative set of assumptions that were carried through all phases of the assessment."

The report is not only too general, but should have been done a long time ago, said some members of the community who spoke to committee.

The study "says this report is meant as a feasibility study only," said Orono resident Linda Gasser. "Generally, feasibility studies are conducted prior to decisions being taken rather than a year after the fact."

The report "focuses on narrow scientific literature," said Paul-Andre Larose, a PhD.

"It fails to investigate a wide array of papers in the scientific literature; this should truly be the work of researchers in the field, especially given the complexity of the issues. Moreover,

there is an enhanced credibility factor as data published in scientific journals is the object of scrutiny and peer reviewing," he said.

"The report does not contain data from health professionals or academics. This is a very important source of information that cannot be ignored; these are people who generally have no vested financial interest in an outcome."

But, the report was peer reviewed by a number of individuals, including a medical doctor who has a specialty in public health, said Dr. Ollson.

"We didn't come to the table and say, look, here's the report, take it as it is," said Dr. Ollson, who, like Dr. Larose, holds a PhD. "We fully expect that academics, public health officials ... would peer review the report."

The Regions are in the midst of presenting findings of the report to the public, at a number of sessions, including several next week in Clarington. More information on the sessions can be found at www.region.durham.on.ca or www.durhamyorkwaste.ca.