

Incineration: The numbers game. It's hard to see the truth through all the smoke

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There's nothing like a good, clean hit to enliven either a hockey game or a public debate, and Peterborough consultant Clarissa Morawski landed a beauty this spring when she looked at the emissions data for the necklace of large garbage incinerators our suburban neighbours plan to build around Toronto.

The data, supplied by the vendors of incinerators and published as an appendix to the environmental assessment of the plant that Hamilton and Niagara Region hope to build, showed an entirely different picture from the rosy propaganda the vendors and their agents had spun about their wondrous technology.

Unlike the old incinerators that were once considered safe - until they weren't - the new ones are said to be advanced "energy-to-waste" facilities that turn household waste into clean energy. But the data submitted by the vendors themselves showed that this new technology was one of the dirtiest imaginable ways to produce power - far worse even than coal-fired power plants in terms of heavy-metal and greenhouse-gas emissions.

"I was absolutely shocked that incineration is still under consideration, given the pollution profile alone," Ms. Morawski said at the time. So were a lot of people when she published her findings in *Solid Waste Magazine*. In the time since then, concerns about the huge costs and potential hazards of incineration have led Halton Region to cancel plans to build a facility, while Niagara and York are slipping free of the partnerships they once entered to do the same.

But Hamilton and Durham still appear determined to go it alone with their big burners, doubling down on what their counterparts considered a losing bet. They do have one new advantage: The inconvenient facts that helped deter the others no longer exist.

Within weeks of Ms. Morawski's critique, the "comparative emission study" she relied on disappeared from the website documenting the Hamilton-Niagara environmental assessment. Within months of the date one of the facilities is scheduled to be built - thanks to the McGuinty government's recent decision to fast-track incinerator projects - there is no agreed-upon data about what will come out of their stacks.

The reason, according to the consultant who advised that the data be "taken down," is that they were incorrect. "We've found more recent information that corrects it," said David Merriman of Genivar Inc., the firm advising both the Hamilton and the Durham teams on their projects. The Niagara document, which was posted for more than a year, was only a draft, according to Mr. Merriman.

"We found, having posted it, there were some incorrect things," he said. "We removed it and we're now working on a corrected version that we will be presenting in September."

Mr. Merriman wouldn't say when he discovered the data was incorrect, but acknowledged the review was inspired in part by incinerator vendors "who told us the emissions coming out of the new technologies are lower than they have been historically."

So they get to supply new numbers, based on their fondest hopes for the very latest technology, to update the image of facilities that were once considered state-of-the-art, low-emission power plants - until they weren't, sometime last week, at which point they reverted to being dirty old mass-burn incinerators.

Technology advances - and so does the tricky business of calculating greenhouse-gas emissions, which represent another image problem for the nasty old incinerators that were so clean and modern last week. Thus the consultants also plan to introduce new, radically downgraded estimates about their carbon-dioxide emissions to replace the ugly numbers that disappeared.

The change is necessary not because there is new technology that reduces carbon emissions from garbage burners, according to Mr. Merriman, but because there is new thinking about how to count them. The actual emissions will stay the same, but the numbers reported in September will likely be halved.

Incinerator vendors have long supported such an approach, which is used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to calculate national carbon inventories - and assumes, among many other things, that all the paper and wood burned as garbage will come from renewable sources. But applying such factors to emissions from actual burners with real smokestacks is highly controversial.

"It's totally inappropriate that anyone would apply IPCC guidelines when measuring emissions from thermal stations," Ms. Morawski said. "We just want to know what comes out of the stack."

But we no longer do - and likely never will, if the new arithmetic prevails and reported carbon emissions fall dramatically this September. In the meantime, numbers swirl headily behind the scenes.

What a spectacle. It's enough to make you realize why the McGuinty government exempted garbage incinerators from the Environmental Assessment Act. Learning the truth about them is such a confusing business.

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