

Energy-from-Waste or Waste of Energy?

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty recently announced that the province will allow municipalities to fast-track garbage incineration pilot projects. His hope is that Ontario will become a leader in incineration. Proponents of garbage incineration, also known as energy-from-waste technology, see it as a solution to alleviate pressure on dwindling landfill space while generating valuable energy in the process. This announcement has been met with criticism and concern from environmental groups and the general public alike.

Questions raised about the potentially dangerous emissions generated from these plants are often answered with claims of new advanced “clean” technologies that eliminate or remove harmful contaminants from the air. The issue of emissions from incineration is a complex and important topic in itself, worthy of its own discussion. I would like to focus on some of the other aspects of this technology, which call into question the sensibility of choosing it as a solution to our waste and energy issues.

The first area of concern is that incinerators require a constant flow of garbage to run effectively and efficiently. Ontario and other jurisdictions across the country, and globe are pushing for reductions in waste generation and increased waste diversion through various initiatives such as Blue Box programs. This seems to be in direct conflict with the needs of incinerators for garbage. How can incinerators be a sound, long term, investment if, they are powered by dwindling, non-renewable resources (garbage)? Does the requirement for garbage by the incinerator not undermine the push for reduction and recycling? What is left to incinerate once all recyclable materials are removed from the waste stream? The residual waste remaining would mainly be comprised of certain plastics and other composite materials, which are difficult to separate. The next logical question then would be why aren't these residual plastics or other materials recyclable or reusable? Incineration is an easy solution to deal with the residual problem, but the more sensible approach would be to shift focus back to the root cause of the problem. Extended producer responsibility is one example of shifting the focus back to the source of the problem, with the intention of reducing the amount of waste generated at its source.

A second area of concern is that incinerators are seen as valuable energy producers. The pro-incineration argument of recovering energy from waste does not hold up if we look at the bigger picture. There is more imbedded energy in the waste being incinerated than is recovered. This, in itself, is not sustainable in the long term as most of the garbage is manufactured from non-renewable resources. The energy savings from reducing, reusing and recycling waste greatly outweighs any energy recovered from incinerating it. Again, this argument ties back into the direct conflict of incineration with reduction and recycling initiatives. How can the Government be encouraging waste diversion

on one hand (i.e. Ontario 60% diversion by 2008), while on the other hand relying on that very waste that they are trying to divert to provide its citizens with energy.

In closing, I would like to give Dalton McGuinty credit for understanding that his government can help Ontarians be leaders and innovators in waste management solutions, but would recommend that the sensible solution would be to shift the focus away from how to deal with waste through incineration and onto the root of the problem – reducing waste from being generated in the first place.

Ben Dunbar, BES, CEPIT
Project Coordinator
AET Consultants Inc.