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It's not waste; it's energy

By John P. DeVillars | December 2, 2009

WITH ONE executive action, the Commonwealth can make substantial progress on two environmental challenges: reducing greenhouse gas emissions and disposing of our garbage more sustainably. These important objectives can be met by lifting the state's ban on building waste-to-energy facilities.

Twenty years ago, Massachusetts issued the nation's first solid waste master plan. At the time, the Commonwealth recycled less than 5 percent of its garbage and sent the remainder to either hundreds of unlined town dumps, eight in-state waste-to-energy facilities, or out of state. The state's master plan sought to overhaul that approach by strongly emphasizing recycling and halting the construction of any landfills or waste-to-energy plants.

The Commonwealth's efforts to implement that plan have paid substantial environmental dividends. We now recycle more than one-third of our waste and recover through energy, composting, and reuse another 25 percent. Scores of unregulated landfills have been closed. And those waste-to-energy facilities have added millions of dollars worth of advanced air pollution control technologies to meet the new public health and environmental standards that the US Environmental Protection Agency and the state have established.

Yet the job of responsible waste management is far from done. Our recycling rate has leveled; last year it actually went down. As more landfills reach capacity, we are fast running out of in-state disposal capacity - in the next five years we are slated to more than double the costly and unsustainable practice of exporting our waste to other states.

New waste-to-energy facilities can help meet these challenges. They can add in-state capacity so that we can end the practice of burying our waste in someone else's backyard. They can help advance recycling by diverting recyclable wastes from their facilities to recycling centers. And because every ton of trash that we turn into energy is the equivalent of using one less barrel of oil or one ton less coal, generating energy from waste can contribute to addressing the global challenge of climate change.

For those who are concerned that adding waste-to-energy capacity will hurt our efforts to recycle, the data suggest otherwise. Massachusetts communities served by waste-to-energy plants have embraced the concept of reduce, reuse, recycle and recover. They consistently recycle at a higher rate than communities not served by such facilities.

The rest of the industrialized world is moving in precisely this direction. The European Union is on course to reduce use of landfills by 65 percent and replace those with waste-to-energy facilities and greater recycling. China plans to kick the coal habit in part through waste-to-energy. Their goal is 30 percent of their waste stream dedicated to energy production. Germany is already at 30 percent; Denmark is currently even higher - 55 percent of its waste stream goes to creating clean energy. The US government, 25 states, and the District of Columbia consider waste-to-energy as a renewable resource. Here and abroad policy makers recognize that this approach to waste management is not only an environmentally sustainable use of our garbage but also an important step in the fight to combat global climate change.

The moratorium on new waste-to-energy facilities made sense 20 years ago, but the world has changed. So, too, should our policies. It's time to lift the moratorium.

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