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We need to stop wasting waste, and here's how

Start by thinking of trash as a valuable resource -- because it is. Then stop burying it in the ground

By Andrew Weaver, Special to the Sun, October 8, 2009

Wishful thinking is no basis on which to make policy - on solid waste management any more than on global warming. We are too familiar with the effect of wishful thinking on the latter. A chorus of self-interested campaigners has told us that global warming is nothing to worry about. Wishing and hoping that they're telling the truth, we have so far failed to take the urgent actions necessary.

We need to undo that mistake and to stop ourselves from making others that are similar, which, in the current instance, means opening our eyes to the risks and opportunities of using waste-to-energy systems to deal with our garbage.

I recognize that this is a difficult task. In a perfect world, there would be no "waste." We would reduce or reuse more effectively, putting compost in the garden, taking packaging back to the store that sold it and dropping only the smallest amount of material into the recycle box.

On the latter point, recycling, Metro Vancouver is a national leader, diverting 55 per cent of its waste stream into the recycling program in 2007. But that leaves almost 1.6 million tonnes of waste. In just over five years, by which time Metro Vancouver hopes to be diverting 70 per cent, that will still leave one million tonnes.

Now, we can hope to do better, but we can't ignore the responsibility to manage the waste that will, inevitably, be left over. In fact, that management is made much easier if we instead think of "waste" as a valuable resource.

Metro Vancouver has been talking about the solution that is now standard across Europe. The Europeans call it "thermal treatment." Metro Vancouver is calling it "waste-to-energy," and the opponents are calling it "incineration." It's all the same. You burn that which would otherwise be fodder for the landfill and you use it to create energy. In Europe, they generate enough electricity for seven million homes and enough heat to pipe into 14.3 million more. I call it sensible "resource management."

This avoids the burning of fossil fuels and it makes the best use -- one last "re-use" out of something that might have been wasted in a landfill.

The concern, of course, is that waste-to-energy facilities generate emissions, ranging from fine particles to carbon dioxide -- none of which we want added to the atmosphere. We wish it weren't so. We wish there was no "waste" that needed burning. But here's the complicated part: conventional landfill of waste -- even if it's neutralized by mechanical biological treatment -- is worse from an emissions standpoint.

So, what do we do? Hoping and praying the waste will go away is a poor option. We should all be making every effort to reduce, reuse and recycle, but we can't substitute impractical optimism for responsible planning.

Taking our garbage for a scenic drive to Cache Creek and burying it in the ground also seems like a dated solution. We use energy (to move the garbage) and we waste energy (by not recovering it in a local waste-to-energy facility). Worse still, decomposing waste also emits the more potent greenhouse gas methane into the air.

We live in a carbon-constrained world -- a world where the decline in available oil would be forcing a global change in energy options, even if climate change were not.

In such a world, we cannot afford to throw fuel away.

We also live in a world much at risk from campaigns of disinformation -- crusades that put self-interest ahead of the public interest, as well as well-intentioned, but poorly reasoned battles for public attention and support.

In such a world, each of us has a responsibility to look a bit harder at the facts -- to accept the responsibility of making difficult, complex decisions with a clear eye. There is neither time, nor energy to waste.

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