April 13, 2010, 6:18 pm

Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash?

By THE EDITORS

Robert F. Bukaty/Associated Press A landfill in Bath, Maine.

Updated, April 14, 3:30 p.m. | Neil Seldman of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance joins the discussion.

An article in The Times this week reports on the broad use of new, cleaner garbage incinerators across Europe that convert trash into heat and electricity. In Denmark, these plants have been embraced even in wealthy suburbs because they curb energy costs, reduce the use of landfills and cut carbon dioxide emissions.

But these next-generation incinerators, known as waste-to-energy plants, have not caught on in the United States, where most garbage is still hauled to distant landfills. What stands in the way of the U.S. adopting more of these advanced technologies?

- Steve Cohen, Earth Institute, Columbia University
- Ananda Lee Tan, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives
- R. Lawrence Swanson and Christine O’Connell, Stony Brook University
- Laura Haight, New York Public Interest Research Group
- John W. Norton, waste management consultant
- Nickolas Themelis, Columbia’s Earth Engineering Center
- Neil Seldman, Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Cheap Land and Politics

Steven Cohen is executive director the Earth Institute at Columbia University and director of Columbia’s masters programs in Sustainability Management and Environmental Science and Policy.

There are two reasons for the failure to use modern waste management technologies in the United States. In the West, landfilling is much cheaper and land is still plentiful. In the Northeast, the reason is political. When you add the cost of transportation to landfilling, waste-to-energy incineration is competitive, but no one wants a plant in their backyard.

If we all had to manage our own garbage, maybe we’d figure out a way to make less of it.

While this country’s vast land mass inhibits the use of waste treatment technologies, over the past half century increased amounts of waste have been recycled or incinerated. In 1960, 94 percent, or 2.51 pounds, of the 2.68 pounds of waste we disposed of per capita, per day ended up in landfills or non-energy-producing incinerators.

In 2008, 54 percent, or 2.43 pounds, of every 4.5 pounds we threw out each day were handled in that fashion. The percent of garbage being buried is going down, while the amount has gone up.

Read more...

Incineration Remains a Serious Threat

Ananda Lee Tan is the U.S. and Canada coordinator for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives.

For decades the tobacco industry told us that cigarettes were safe. Now the waste incineration industry wants us
to believe they are coming clean?

Despite the latest spin, there is nothing better about burning garbage today, whether in the U.S. or in Denmark. Attempts to peddle waste-to-energy facilities haven’t gained wide acceptance around the world because people are aware that incineration:

- **Remains a serious threat to public health.** Burning garbage is a primary source of cancer-causing dioxins and other pollutants that enter the food supply and concentrate up through the food chain.
- Produces more carbon dioxide per unit of electricity than coal power. Current atmospheric carbon loads cannot safely bear additional **emissions from incinerators and landfills.**
- Is a huge waste of energy. Due to its low calorific value, burning garbage to produce energy is highly inefficient. Conversely, **recycling recovers three to five times more energy** than incineration produces.

**Significant Advantages**

![Graphic: Two Approaches to Waste](https://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com)

**R. Lawrence Swanson** is the director of the Waste Reduction and Management Institute, at the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences (SoMAS) at Stony Brook University. **Christine O’Connell** is a graduate student researching garbage and recycling issues on Long Island and pursuing her Ph.D. in marine science at SoMAS.

The environmental and public health benefits of using waste-to-energy facilities, particularly in congested urban areas, far outweigh transporting trash to landfill sites several hundred miles away. Emission issues that were legitimate concerns decades ago have been largely negated with modern technologies, and dioxin formation is almost totally minimized.

Toxic exhaust of fuel-inefficient, 18-wheeled garbage trucks motoring hundreds of miles to rural landfills are of greater concern than stack emissions from a waste-to-energy plant. On Long Island, some 300 of these vehicles go west everyday, hauling about 22 tons each! These vehicles cause wear and tear on highways and are a traffic, public health and environmental hazard. Long hauling garbage isn’t good, no matter how you measure the impact.

But what about those mega landfills in places like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia? Is it right to dump our solid waste in communities that probably had little to say in the decision process exploiting their landscape?
Start With Waste Reduction

Laura Haight is senior environmental associate with the New York Public Interest Research Group.

Ever since the ill-fated journey of the infamous Long Island garbage barge in 1987, Americans have been acutely aware that there is no place called “away” where the garbage all goes, and there are no magic bullets to solve our waste problems.

Recycling saves three to five times the amount of energy that incineration generates.

In 1988, in the aftermath of this embarrassment, New York adopted its first state law mandating source separation of recyclable materials, and set an ambitious goal of 50 percent waste reduction and recycling by 1997. But according to the state’s recently released draft Solid Waste Management Plan, New York is achieving a paltry 20 percent recycling rate of its mixed household waste. This is unacceptable.

Where there’s a will, there’s a way to achieve far more successful recycling rates than the dismal performance in New York and most of the country. San Francisco, for instance, has set a goal of sending zero waste to landfills or incinerators by 2020, and is already achieving an impressive 72 percent recovery rate through aggressive recycling, reuse, and composting programs.

Read more…

‘Zero Waste’ Isn’t Realistic

John W. Norton, a consultant who specializes in waste management, is the chairman of the ASME solid waste processing division of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

When it comes to solid waste management, perfection is the enemy of progress. “Zero waste” sounds perfect, but even recycling isn’t perfect. When someone says “recycling,” we think of bottles and cans being recovered and reused whole or broken down, remelted or whatever to make a new product — all so clean and wonderful.

Waste-to-energy facilities need to be part of the mix, and we need a vocal minority to support them.

Recycling is good, but it has a whole host of environmental and human health problems as well. It takes extra fuel, more trucking and human exposure to raw waste.

Recycling does not and cannot be used for all our solid waste. It’s not all bottles and cans. Nor is it all recyclable newspaper, cardboard, office paper, reusable plastic. Even if we processed food waste separately into soil amendments, there is still a heap of unrecyclable trash. Much of it is filthy. No one pictures bloodied bandages and contaminated adult diapers when they preach “zero waste.” But those articles are there, in household waste. And so is a host of other dirty, disgusting stuff which can’t be wished away.

Read more…
New York City’s Big Mistake

Nickolas Themelis, the Stanley-Thompson Professor Emeritus of Chemical Metallurgy, is the director of the Earth Engineering Center at Columbia University.

Over the last 15 years, New York City has sent more than two million garbage trucks to out-of-state landfills and buried the equivalent of 45 million barrels of oil. It didn’t have to be this way.

The problem: a vociferous minority in the city and in the state that is totally against ‘incineration.’

In 1989, Mayor David Dinkins and the city developed a good plan that included recycling and also building a number of facilities for combustion with energy recovery. These waste-to-energy facilities were designed with advanced air pollution control systems similar to those used now in all “waste-to-energy” plants that have reduced dioxin emissions these plants to 10 grams of toxic equivalent dioxins for the entire U.S.

Unfortunately, when Mayor Rudy Giuliani came into office he scrapped these plans mainly because of opposition from some organizations, based on the emissions of incinerators in the 1980s, before Environmental Protection Agency regulations had been implemented.

Read more…

A Bad Economic Deal


Environmental questions are not the primary concerns of many in the U.S. who oppose garbage incineration. While environmental concerns usually wake people up, the economic and financial issues are paramount.

Incinerators don’t make financial sense when other approaches are cheaper.

Cities and counties cannot afford the cost of building waste-to-energy plants, which typically cost $650 million per plant. With 20 years of bond payments this would amount to $1.3 billion, plus operating costs.

The difference between Denmark and the U.S. is that we have landfills giving us time to carry out more recycling and composting that are 10 percent the cost of incineration. Plus the raw materials returned to industry and agriculture create jobs, (about 5 to 10 more jobs vs. incineration in just processing, and much more in manufacturing).

Read more…

- E-mail This
- Print
- Share Close
  - Linkedin
Joan
California
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Burn, baby, burn!

When I was putting the recycles in one bin and the trash in another recently I wished we could go back to incineration to deal with paper goods we can't recycle. If only there was a better and more eco-friendly incinerator out there. Well, by golly, there is, and a nation with a population smaller than Los Angeles County is using it.

This is an incredible opportunity for a wannabe green state like California. It provides a new, improved method of an old power source and job opportunities as well. The only down side for us is that we don't use centralized heating systems (not housewide, communitywide), but I'm sure we can find a way to do this.

Military bases are always working on housing of some sort. Perhaps that would be a good place to start.
Communities that have suffered extensive damage and need rebuilding would be another.

Here's something to write your Member of Congress about. This "pork" project can help the entire USA. It can be as big as the highway programs of the 50's and 60's. It may not free us from oil, but it can lower our dependency, and as plastic can be used, we might be able to "mine" those plastic gyres in mid ocean for fuel. And, it's not a nuclear disaster waiting to happen like Three Mile Island or Chernobyl.

2. wim
New York, NY
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
So much in this article frustrates me about American attitudes. Even the photograph of the park, with rubber tires for swings, made me chuckle. Ask many Americans about building parks entirely from recycled materials like tires and the response is apt to be “pfft, that's dumb.” The environmental movement, so to speak, has been so effectively marginalized (demonized almost seems too active a word!) that even obvious, no brainer ideas like this face implacable walls of non-specific opposition. Continuing distrust of the evidence of global warming is exacerbating the situation - now, any initiative with even secondary environmental benefits can be reframed instantly as a crackpot project.

Why don't they have these problems in Denmark? Is it simply our society's natural contrarian streak?

Rob
Tucson AZ formerly of NYC
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
The Americans who comment negatively are ill informed, too young to have the clout that their "degrees" would allow them to have, and are probably not well traveled. I did a year in France, my junior year in high school, in 1972. At that time, the bulk of Europeans did not use tissues for nose blowing, nor have a clue about toilet paper. Yet, in the past 35+ years, the EU has blown past us in every way: from their quality of life, the quality of their appliances, the efficiency of power generation and usage, to the little things like health care, cell phone rules, free broadband provided by municipalities, food pricing and minimum wage issues.

What ever gives us the idea that we're so exceptional?? Is it the incredible corp spending on elections and advertising; is it the fact that the bulk of our national "legislators" wouldn't know a true piece of legislation if it bit them? After all, they are so busy raising cash and promising things to donors, that they have barely post-college kids, with zero experience at life, but lots of experience with churches and doctrine, who read the bills for them and comment. Consequently, we have laws created by true believers [for whom obedience to something is mandatory for life satisfaction; because it's the next life that counts, not this one], a clear minority, regulating the rest of us. Often against our collective self interest.

Trash to energy isn't hitting it big here, because the enviro group, of which I consider myself a "member" is controlled by a small vocal monied few. They get tiny concessions from the dominant industry, oil & coal, call it success and rail like lunatics against the better technologies to maintain a slightly "cleaner" status quo. The day we either expand the number of legislators, redraw districts correctly, or simply mature a bit will be the day that things will actually change.

Needless to say, I don't see it happening in my lifetime in this country. Therefore, I am moving to Europe to spend my last 15 or so years w/o strife and turmoil that exists in the states.

Travel is broadening; more US citizens should try it before making pronouncements that are so absurd as to make the bulk of us sound like blithering idiots.

jbl1120
berkeley, ca
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
I am really surprised at the bias towards burning shown in this article. Many of the pro-WTE commenters are missing the point. WTE works in countries like Denmark because they have achieved a very high level of recycling. Citizens of these countries fastidiously sort materials into many more categories than we do.

In the US, the temptation for all involved would be to burn our waste and call it alternative energy, but burning materials that have value, such as paper, plastic containers, organic material (for compost), and especially metals...
is not even close to highest and best use. Once we are truly recycling everything we can, let's take a look at what
is left and then weigh the merits of burying vs. burning.

If we implement WTE now, we will bypass recycling simply because it is less convenient than throwing
everything in one bin. WTE owners often set up restrictive contracts with municipalities that guarantee them a
minimum amount of "feedstock" (a.k.a. waste). Thus there is an insatiable need to "feed the beast" with little
guard for the value of the materials being burned. As noted by others, recycling creates more jobs, reduces our
reliance on foreign oil used to manufacture new products, and recovers the full value of materials.

5.
Lee Jamison
Stuyvesant NY
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
I live on the banks of the Hudson, upstate. Million dollar view---except we can't drink the water, eat the fish or
safely breathe the air because of mercury. We have fended off burn plants and sludge facilities and cement plants
but not a cement plant that intends to incinerate tires. Beneficial Use Fuel they call it! You want to breathe it?
The cement plant just lost a law suit for discharging more mercury into our air than they said they did. So they
pay a settlement ($490,000 in NYS); cost of doing business. Sorry, incineration is not clean or safe or adequately
monitored. Reduce, reuse, recycle and compost! Demand that manufacturers redesign products to minimize waste
and eliminate toxic components. Don't be grossed-out by bloody bandage and diaper scare tactics!

6.
Wallace
Virginia
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
There was a very successful demonstration of a solid waste landfill in King County, Washington. However it was
shut down after the demonstration. Why?

Washington State is an area of very inexpensive hydroelectric energy. But natural gas is very costly. The King
County found they would be better off to sell their gas and obtain electricity from hydroelectric suppliers.

Fuel cells are a very non polluting way to dispose of the gas from solid waste landfills. The gas is reformed to
hydrogen and converted to electric energy by electrochemical means that operates at a lower temperature than the
temperature of combustion. Therefore, the process eliminates almost all toxic pollution, SO2, NOX, and
particulate matter, 99% eliminated when compared to a coal fired steam plant.

The molten carbonate fuel cell of Fuel Cell Energy Co that was used, is a high temperature fuel cell that does not
use a platinum catalyst and is not poisoned by carbon monoxide in the reformate as a low temperature fuel cell
would be. It just makes more electricity out of it.

The efficiency of such a fuel cell is very high in small sizes. Even a 300 kW fuel cell has a higher efficiency,
47%, than a large conventional optimally sized coal fired steam plant that at best has a 38% efficiency (apart
from risky supercritical steam plants that go up to 43%). Moreover, when efficiency is measured at the customer's
meter, the efficiency is 47% for the fuel cell, and only 29% during on-peak utility hours for the large 500,000 kW
conventional plant because of the electrical losses in transmission and distribution lines according to a study
performed by Detroit Edison.

The fuel cells while comparatively efficient currently have a higher hardware cost than other technologies. But
they have a sharply declining production cost curve and a learning curve. They started out at $8,000 per kW and
now they are down to about $3,000/kW.

Some of the production is going to South Korea -- that ought to bring the cost down in a hurry even more. And
the volume is increasing. The learning curve helps quite a lot too.

In my view the solid waste landfill problem can be solved using high temperature fuel cells, either molten carbonate fuel cells such as Fuel Cell Energy has in operation at about 50 stations around the world, or with Solid Oxide Fuel Cells such as that proposed by Bloom Energy. But Bloom must look out for VERSA Power Systems, an affiliate of Fuel Cell Energy Co. that has been participating in the DOE billion dollar SECA cost reduction program and has the cost, at high volume production, now down to $750 per kW and proposing to decline to $400 per kW by 2012.

Recommen... Recommended by 6 Readers

7. Floridian44
Vero Beach, Florida
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Man, I am so sick of unrealistic people holding up the way of progress. Progressive thinkers were and still should be the backbone of our US society. I also believe Mr. John Norton was spot on with his statement that "perfection is the enemy of progress". I agree that recyling, reuse and reduction all are important parts of waste management but if Ms. Haight believes that these alone are enough, she is delusional and shouldn't be taken seriously anymore. First of all, we will never achieve the levels she states are possible because this country is way too large with too many "consumers". Consumers produce waste and not all is recyclable. That which is not will need to be landfilled or incinerated. What I see being done in Europe gives me great hope that incinerators have come a long way in their technology and design and should be seriously considered here in the U.S.

Recommen... Recommended by 29 Readers

8. Jack D. Lauber PE
Albany NY
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Ms. Rosenthal’s article makes good sense, telling about the realities of state-of –the-art waste to energy technologies in Europe. The real opposition to WTE, isn’t toxic emissions from WTE facilities anymore, as the new USEPA MACT emission standards have reduced WTE air emissions to negligible levels with little public health risk. Even Greenpeace’s top research scientist, Paul Johnson of the UK has acknowledged this. The NYC environmental community advocates “zero waste “ solutions, i.e. complete recycling etc. not fully realizing that recycling depends upon technical and economic realities. For example only about 20% of plastics can be effectively recycled, and it’s foolish to put such high energy materials in the ground, when they can be thermally recycled into useful renewable energy, and reduce our dependence on imported fuels.

It’s also important to recognize that WTE increases material recycling. European data reveal that nations with WTE like Germany and the Netherlands, have about 60% recycling, double that of the United States.

Thus WTE is the proper zero waste to landfill strategy, which will recover valuable renewable energy, avoid polluting waste transport to landfills, and also reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Jack D. Lauber PE BCEE
www.envtechpro.com

Jack Lauber is a Chemical, Professional Engineer, Board Certified Environmental Engineer, and a Research Associate at Columbia University’s Earth Engineering Center. He was formerly Chief, Technology Assessment NY State Dept. of Environmental Conservation and is now an Environmental Engineering consultant.

For a recent video on WTE, go to my website above and click on links.

Recommen... Recommended by 20 Readers

9. Tom in San Jose
San Jose, CA
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Why burn or bury our trash. Clearly, Europe has a handle on how to convert trash into energy so the simple thing for the U.S. to do is put all the trash that is compatible with Europe's processing on massive barges and push them into the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream will move the barges to Europe (at no cost) where they can be picked up and unloaded.

It's the same approach we used in the 1930's when the 2nd Avenue El in NYC was torn down. All that "junk" steel was shipped to Japan who converted it into munitions and sent it back to us in the form of bombs. It makes one wonder what Europe will send our converted trash back as. Energy weapons developed at CERN?

The EU through Directives and taxes make landfill disposal unattractive. These include the obligation under its Landfill Directive to divert more than 65 percent of biodegradable waste from landfills vs. 1995. This is enforced through infringement procedures, fines and other actions throughout the EU.

As an economic incentives, many member states impose landfill taxes of 90 euro / tonne making incineration economically more attractive (its that simple).

Finally, some member states, do not allow biodegradable waste of more than 5 percent in landfill, such as Germany.

Hence, municipalities have little choice to but to treat waste to these limits, generally firstly with pre-sorting (about 60% is what can be recycle is), followed by incineration or fermentation or a combination of both.

The small town where I live has a "solid waste transfer station" where we can drop off our garbage and recyclables (there is no pickup service) - except for the containers that qualify for the 5-cent return fee - we have to drive 40 miles for a refund. I asked why no donation container for 5-cent HI returnables and was told "they'd just steal them"... and assume would take them to the refund site for cash, and it's served it's purpose far as I can tell.

Recently the waste management announced New Hours of Operation! Which meant instead of being open every day except Christmas, New Years, and Thanksgiving, we now would have access Monday, Thursday, and Friday from 9 till 4. With total public outrage at that, we have now been accommodated by them opening at 6:30am on Thursday. And they're paying someone to guard the dump.

But with Burn or Bury - which method would be least likely to pollute groundwater? Why not build one state-of-the art incinerator at a place that wants it and see the results? And have a national recycling campaign?

We're way past due on the garbage issue.
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Don'tcha love it when no one listens, and they all just blab past each other? Common sense should rule, and the experts (so-called) should be forced to make factual arguments with human casualties as the metric. Isn't that what we're talking about? Not esthetics, but lives lost due to sickness, air pollution, truck diesel emissions, troop losses defending our profligate lifestyle, on and on.

More from this discussion:

Recommend Recommended by 7 Readers

13.
percentq
home

April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
To me the outcomes of burning or burying are either more air pollution or more land use. From the land use also comes pollution, I say burning is better because it is efficient and can make usable energy, and it will be another reason why we need strict regulations on gas emissions; from trash burning to autos.

Recommend Recommended by 4 Readers

14.
johnny3840
Irvine, CA
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Here we go again!!! A very promising technology; at the very least, worthy of serious study, is held hostage by vested interests that are solely interested in, dismissing out of hand, any alternatives that threaten their existence.

Recommend Recommended by 30 Readers

15.
john gogol
Portland, OR
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Burn it!!!!! We are already pumping the same carbon per kilowatt with coal, gas and oil. The technology to do it is available. We refuse to develop sustainable markets for recycled plastics. Get on with it, burn it!!!!

john gogol
Plastics Recycling Engineer

Recommend Recommended by 12 Readers

16.
izzy
seattle
April 14th, 2010
6:45 am
Neither! (What, are you stuck in the 50's?) Compost, recycle, and just say "no, thank you".

Recommend Recommended by 9 Readers

17.
DS
NJ
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
There's a third option: anaerobic digesters.

http://www.anaerobic-digestion.com...

Recommend Recommended by 8 Readers

18.
Victoria
Gold Coast, Australia
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
As a lay person with an interest in the environment, I have a hard time following the argument of the so-called environmentalists in the U.S. here. People like Laura Haight from NY PIRG and Ananda Tan are creating a straw man argument when they imply, as they both seem to be doing, that using trash as fuel for power plants will lead to a reduction in recycling. As the attached article clearly states, in the Denmark region that was profiled, recyclables are STILL recycled at much higher levels than in New York City, and the remaining trash is burned. It's not an either/or proposition. To the contrary, the two practices would seem to go hand-in-hand.

Ms. Haight suggests that the alternative to these plants is recycling ALL waste. Good luck seeing that happen anytime soon. My husband and I are careful recyclers and, happily, manage to recycle the great bulk of our waste products. But there are still many things that cannot be recycled, at least not at present. (There is also a limit to how much time and effort people have available to spend sorting their trash into more and more stacks, as well as a limit to the space available, especially to those living in NYC apartments.) Sending the many items that still cannot be recycled to a clean, modern power plant such as the one profiled certainly seems to be a better alternative than sending those items to a landfill. (By the way, Mr. Tan, you acknowledge that 10% of municipal waste will not be able to be recycled even in your best case scenario; where, exactly, would you prefer to see that waste go?)

Moreover, Ms. Haight and Mr. Tan seem to take it for granted that recycling is the best solution. But it is not at all clear that recycling is actually a better choice than sending trash to a plant such as the one profiled. Ms. Haight castigates trash-burning power plants as “extremely costly to build and to operate, and consequently they rely heavily on the revenue stream from power generation. This means there needs to be a steady supply of waste to feed the plant, which is in direct conflict with the “3 R’s” — reduce, reuse, recycle.” But isn’t all this also true for recycling plants? They are expensive to build and operate (and hence require their own steady streams of trash in order to be profitable), and create their own emissions (just like the power plants). And are all of those emissions captured by filters and scrubbers like the Danish plant? In short, is there enough evidence to say for certain that 100% recycling (even if it were feasible, which I highly doubt) is really a better option than sending some trash to these plants? Why is Ms. Haight so wedded to recycling as the only option? Is it because, after pushing so hard for recycling services, she is afraid that those recycling plants will become even more uneconomic than some of them already are if other destinations for our trash are contemplated? If so, I would just reiterate that there is no conflict between advocating increased recycling AND advocating that any trash left over be sent to these modern power plants.

As someone who cares about the environment, sending the trash that we are not recycling to a clean plant like the one profiled seems to be a no-brainer compared to sending it to a landfill. It is environmentally unfriendly simply GETTING trash to a landfill several states away, and things don’t seem to be much better when it is actually there, decomposing and sending pollutants into the atmosphere as described in the article. (Beyond the fact that do we really want to fill up more and more of our countryside with big heaps of trash?) I don't understand what these so-called environmentalists profiled above are so afraid of. Their position seems to be endemic of what we are seeing in American politics of late: insisting on hewing to an extreme view, when the best option is really somewhere in the middle.

Recommend Recommended by 29 Readers

19.
richard boaz
Valwigerberg, Germany
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
lack of pragmatism, as is the current US policy in so many things, will be the undoing of the future.

europe looks to and lives in the future while the US sits around and discusses it, ad nauseum, until simply nothing happens.

you want zero waste? get rid of the people.

Recommend Recommended by 15 Readers
20.
JM Simon
Brussels
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
Why do you always take things from the wrong end? The question of whether to burn or bury is outdated and irrelevance. In the 21st century the question is to burn or reduce, reuse, recycle and compost.
Contrary to what the article wants to make us believe in Europe there is consensus -backed by science and life cycle studies- that the reduce, reuse, recycle and composting has a better environmental and economic impact than burning in more than 80% of the cases. Even the Danes agree on this.
Denmark is not the best country in waste management in Europe, Flanders in Belgium recycles 75% and has been progressively reducing waste generation to a lot less than what Denmark generates (is it a coincidence that those in Europe who burn the most are also those who generate more waste?).
If you want to compare ourselves to Europeans the first question should be: how do we get from 20% to 75% recycling rate? Once we are there you can start your debate on what to do with the remaining part of the waste (which btw doesn't need to be burnt and probably not even buried), before that these talks are just hot air.

21.
Dee
Anchorage, AK
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
It seems like the anti-incinerator folks are exaggerating Dioxin released but the pro-incinerator folks are minimizing the CO2. I'd like to learn more about how incineration lowers CO2.

22.
andy g
sydney aust
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
some of us are indeed looking forward to "Significant Advantages", where others seem to be off in fairyland.

23.
Reader
Earth
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
Start with waste reduction. Reuse and recycle all you can, forbid all unrecyclable, burn/compost all permitted unrecyclable. In the last case, the filters should be really accurate so that no carbon dioxide and/or other pollutants came into the air. Add algae growing electric plants, for instance: they would use the carbon dioxide to grow algae and then turn algae into something else, like biodegradable plastic.

24.
Larata
Hudson Valley, NY
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
Isn't recycling, with all of its pitfalls, better for the environment, human and animal health than dumping the bottles, the food waste, the paper, etc. into the earth where toxins can (and do) regularly find their way into our aquifers and air? Isn't the creation of electricity or heat from waste -- waste-to-energy -- even though there may be, in some cases, remaining issues about air emissions, better than what we used to do with that material -- that is, burn it in barrels in the backyard, dump it in the ocean, etc.? Isn't composting food and other compostable waste, to turn it back into usable dirt, mulch and ground cover a better use of leftover materials than letting it putrify in landfills?
I think many of us are well aware that each technological component involved in waste disposal is imperfect, but that should not stop us from embracing the concept, if not the practice, of working to get down to zero landfill. Getting to close-to-zero is a journey. Without taking the first and subsequent steps, we'll never get there. Enough naysaying. It's time for doing.

Recommended by 4 Readers

Vincent
Orlando, FL
April 14th, 2010
7:29 am
Waste-to-energy plants must be part of the solution, as Mr. Norton correctly states. Ideological arguments opposing clean incinerators because they discourage 'zero waste' practices or will promote wastefulness are analogous to arguments against condom distribution to sexually active persons because it encourages promiscuity, when in fact, it has lowered rates of teen pregnancy and STDs. The bottom line is, unrecyclable waste will continue to be generated for years to come. We need clean incinerators because the data tells us it is more efficient and more environmentally responsible than landfills.

Recommended by 11 Readers

Post a Comment

You are currently logged in as 75200.

Display Name (What's this) Rosalind Peterson
Location USA
Characters Remaining: 5000

Comment (Required)
Submit

Comments are moderated and generally will be posted if they are on-topic and not abusive. For more information, please see our Comments FAQ.

Search This Blog

Search

Previous post Why Do Educated People Use Bad Words? Recent Next post What Tea Party Backers Want

Discussions

- How to Prevent Adoption Disasters (7)
- What Tea Party Backers Want (282)
- Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash? (154)
- Why Do Educated People Use Bad Words? (281)
- The Nation’s Big Water Repair Bill (76)

Subscribe

- Room for Debate RSS
Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash? - Room for Debate Blog - NYTimes.com

Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash? - Room for Debate Blog - NYTimes.com

Featured Discussions

**Why Do Educated People Use Bad Words?**

Swearing in public or on the Web is not going away anytime soon.

- [Read the Discussion](#)
- [Post a Comment](#)

**Why Do We Still Have Mining Disasters?**

Why, after such a long history of injury and death, does coal mining remain so dangerous?

- [Read the Discussion](#)
- [Post a Comment](#)

**The iPad in the Eyes of the Digerati**

Does the iPad offer users a new medium or is it merely an iPod Touch on steroids?

- [Read the Discussion](#)
- [Post a Comment](#)

**What China's Currency Shift Could Mean**

How will a more flexible Chinese exchange rate benefit the U.S. and other economies?

- Read the Discussion
- Post a Comment

The Health Care Debate

A Historic Moment for Health Care?

Is the health care bill as significant as the creation of Medicare? Will it fundamentally alter the American social safety net? Read what public figures have to say and share your thoughts.

Robert Reich

President Obama’s health care reform bill … has enormous political significance. Read more…

Donna E. Shalala

We now honor working Americans and all our children. Read more…

Ralph Nader

It does not provide coverage that is universal, comprehensive or affordable. Read more…

Jesse L. Jackson Sr.

Passing this landmark health care legislation … is the morally right thing to do. Read more…

Dick Armey

The real winners are insurance companies and big pharma. Read more…

Books You Can Live Without

Multimedia

Books We Can’t Part With

Six authors read favorite passages from books they would never discard.

- Go to Interactive
- Read the Discussion
- Post a Comment

Resources

More on what books to throw out and why it’s a good idea to clean one’s home library.

- Throw Out All My Old Books? (The Guardian)
- Books That Die a Natural Death (The New Yorker)
- Tyler Cowen: Why You Should Throw Books Out
- Lewis Grossberger: Books I’m Finally Throwing Out

Featured Topics

Health Care

- What Happened to a Public Health Plan?
- Selling Health Care Reform to Voters
- Should the Rich Pay for the Uninsured?
- Change to Doctors’ Pay?
- Should Health Insurance Be Mandatory?
- Go to Complete Coverage »

Education
About Room for Debate

In Room for Debate, The Times invites knowledgeable outsiders to discuss major news events and other hot topics. The aim is to hear a variety of voices — well-known, up-and-coming or unexpected — on a range of issues. Discussions include opinion, analysis, context — sometimes all three. Contributors may debate one another, or simply share what they know and move on.

We welcome feedback, so please post comments and e-mail us your suggestions and ideas. Reader comments are moderated. On weekends and at nights, there may be some delay in comment moderation.

Discussion Topics

- AFGHANISTAN
- ASIA
Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash? - Room for Debate Blog - NYTimes.com
Remade in America

The United States has experienced the greatest surge in immigration since the early 20th century. This series examines how American institutions are being pressed to adjust.

- [Read the Discussions »]

Blogroll

Arts and Culture

- [A Daily Dose of Architecture]
- [A List Apart]
- [artnet]
- [Arts & Letters Daily]
- [ArtsBeat]
- [Artworld Salon]
- [BLDGBLOG]

- [Blogging the Reel World]
- [Lens]
- [Modern Art Notes]
- [Paper Cuts]
- [The Moment]
- [Yanko Design]

Business and Economy

- [Baseline Scenario]
- [Becker-Posner]
- [Bruegel]
- [Daniel Gross]
- [Dealbook]
- [Economics Unbound]
- [Economist's View]
- [Economists' Forum]
- [Economix]
- [Executive Suite]
- [Floyd Norris]

- [Freakonomics]
- [Free exchange]
- [FT Comment & Analysis]
- [Marginal Revolution]
- [Paul Krugman]
- [Peterson Institute for International Economics]
- [Real Time Economics]
- [Robert J. Samuelson]
- [The Balance Sheet]
- [The Deal]
- [Today’s Business Press]
Should the U.S. Burn or Bury Its Trash? - Room for Debate Blog - NYTimes.com

4/16/2010