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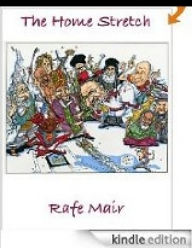
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Is Canada Dropping the Ball on Sustainable Waste Management?

Written by Prof. Paul Connett and Buddy Boyd Tuesday, 27 December 2011 00:38

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Once upon a time North American waste activists looked to Canada for cutting edge moves towards sustainable waste management. Looking back we remember the ban on incineration by the Ontario NDP; the blue box program; the pay-by bag systems; EPR in Vancouver; Ottawa's Take it Back program; Toronto's declaration of a Zero Waste program and door to door to collection of compostables and recyclables throughout Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. Just a few years back Canada was poised for a genuine move towards a Zero Waste future but over the last few years we have seen a return to the sloppy and wasteful efforts at the back end of the problem with a rash of incinerator (and incinerators in disguise like gasification and plasma arc facilities) proposals to destroy rather than recover its waste.

We have seen the Alberta government subsidize the building of a gasifying incinerator plant in Edmonton; the Durham-York region succumb to the efforts of an American waste company (Covanta) to build a huge mass burn incinerator despite intense citizen opposition. Ironically, despite the proclaimed goal of being self-sufficient in waste disposal this project will involve exporting the ash produced (at least 25% of the trash burned) to New York state. Adding still further irony to this "democratic" decision, the politician that spearheaded the incinerator deal – Roger Anderson – does not hold an elected position! Now flushed with victory this same American waste company is angling to build an incinerator in the Peel region in Ontario as well as one or more in the Vancouver region (it has already bought out the company that once ran the Burnaby incinerator).



Canada is backsliding on waste management, choosing incinerators like this one over more sustainable alternatives

Then worst of all, a few weeks ago it was announced that the Ottawa city council had voted 22 to 1 to commit to send a substantial part of its wastestream to the experimental Plasco plasma arc incinerator at the Trail Road landfill. This despite the fact that after 4 years of trying the company has yet to produce any energy on a continuous basis. In fact, when members of the Los Angeles Public Works department visited the facility the company failed three times to get the plant running!

But the really sad part about this is not the support being given by Canada's capital city to an experimental project –with little or no public input – but rather the whole notion of supporting an effort to destroy resources in any fashion. Burning things cannot be considered sustainable. It is a huge waste of the energy used in extraction, manufacture and transport of the materials burned. It is also a huge wasted opportunity to fight global warming, let alone the economic opportunities available in reuse, repair, recycling, composting and re-design.

Our task in the 21st century is not to get better and better at destroying discarded materials but to stop making products and packages that have to be destroyed. This is the heart of the Zero Waste strategy. Waste is not a technological problem but a social one. It is not going to be solved by magic machines but with better organization, better education and better industrial design.

Such costly mistakes may have been understandable 30 years ago but today with San Francisco (a city of 850,000) having achieved a diversion rate of 78% en route to a zero waste goal by 2020, it is inexcusable. For heaven's sake even Naples in Italy has now adopted a zero waste goal!

Instead of building costly incinerators in front of landfills what we need are residual screening facilities that incorporate a zero waste research facility to study the non-recyclable fraction. Nova Scotia has developed the first half of such a facility and uses it to biologically stabilize the dirty organic fraction above ground before it causes problems (odor, methane and leachate) underground. What is need now is the incorporation of the second step: the research facility. Edmonton was ideally placed to do just that but sadly opted for a burner instead.

Such a research facility should involve professors and students from higher education so that this whole effort can be used as a laboratory for sustainability. This facility would represent the nexus between community responsibility at the back end of the problem and industrial responsibility at the front end.

Incinerators set out to make the residuals disappear. The Zero Waste strategy sets out to make them very, very visible. Magic machines, whether they are Covanta type mass burn incinerators or Plasco type plasma arc facilities, miss the point. "If it isn't sustainable it isn't acceptable."

The message that the community needs to deliver to industry is, "If we can't reuse it, recycle it or compost it, you shouldn't be making it. We need better industrial design for the 21 st century."

Professor Paul Connett is a graduate of Cambridge University and holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from Dartmouth College. Since 1983 he taught chemistry at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY where he specialized in Environmental Chemistry and Toxicology. He retired in May 2006 and is currently writing a book on Zero Waste that will be published in Italy in 2012. Ralph Nader said of Paul Connett, "He is the only person I know who can make waste interesting."

Buddy Boyd is leading zero waste efforts on the Sunshine Coast, where he and his wife Barb run the Gibsons Recycling Depot.