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Waste-to-energy can be sound policy

The Boston Globe

October 23, 2008

THE GLOBE addressed an important policy issue in its Oct. 18 editorial "Waste makes haste." In the 1980s, Massachusetts began banning new waste-to-energy facilities, thinking this policy would promote recycling and reduce trash generation. Fast-forward two decades. Has the ban made us a recycling leader? Just the opposite; our recycling rate is mediocre. Has the ban reduced waste generation? No, generation has increased markedly, and we send our large surplus to other states for disposal. This carries a significant cost to Massachusetts in dollars, environmental burden, and, for our hypocrisy, loss of credibility.

Meanwhile, Western European countries, Japan, and progressive states such as Minnesota boast some of the highest recycling rates in the world, while embracing the environmental soundness of recovering energy from post-recycling waste. A key point: Today's waste-to-energy facilities, both modern combustion and gasification types, are safe. Emissions of dioxin and mercury are minuscule compared with two decades ago.

Governor Patrick has shown admirable courage in the positions he has taken on issues such as Cape Wind, police details, auto insurance competition, and budget restraint. Here's another opportunity. Build waste policy on three cornerstones: waste reduction, increased recycling, and modern energy recovery.

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GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

Waste makes haste

October 18, 2008

EVER SINCE the state put a moratorium on new solid-waste incinerators in 1990, residents have been spared the pollutants such facilities would emit. Now the state is working on a solid-waste master plan that might allow new incinerators that turn waste into energy. While the high price of conventional energy points up the need for alternative fuels with low greenhouse gas emissions, the state should be cautious about allowing even these advanced incinerators without first exhausting approaches to waste disposal that have proved environmentally friendly.

The pressures for permitting new incinerators are significant, ranging from the high cost of conventional energy to the cost of shipping the 21 percent of the state's waste now going to out-of-state landfills. Also, new technologies can create a synthetic gas fuel from waste without, advocates say, the emission of toxic pollutants.

But any state master plan worth its salt should begin with the basics: minimize society's use of materials, especially ones containing toxic substances; repair and reuse more products; and recycle such materials as paper, plastic, metal, and glass for new applications. And incinerators aren't the only way to turn waste into fuel; a process called anaerobic digestion can turn organic waste into a usable gas fuel.

Massachusetts, with its flat recycling rate, has been a laggard in these areas. This is no surprise in light of the paltry \$2.7 million the state spends to help communities start or beef up their recycling programs. This is a tiny fraction of the \$37.8 million the state pockets annually in unredeemed bottle and can deposits, which were originally supposed to go to recycling.

Some communities are now experimenting with single-stream recycling, in which households can put out all their recyclables in one container. The technique has shown it can raise recycling rates. The state should help many more towns and cities follow suit. Another spur to more recycling would be extending the nickel deposit to containers of water, juices, and other drinks that aren't subject to the Bottle Bill.

Advocates of new waste-to-energy conversion facilities argue, quite rightly, that sending waste out of state carries a high environmental cost. Not only does the shipping consume diesel, but the buried waste produces methane, a far more destructive greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Also, the waste often contaminates ground water.

But all these valid points argue just as strongly for never letting so much material end up in landfills or ovens in the first place. That should be Job 1 of the state's new master plan for solid waste. ■

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