

Comments on report “Stop Trashing the Climate” by Brenda Platt (Institute for Local Self-Reliance), David Cipler (Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance/Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives), Kate M. Bailey and Eric Lombardi (Eco-Cycle)

This report got it about 50% right: U.S. citizens generate nearly twice the tonnage of municipal solid wastes (MSW, 1.3 tons per person) than citizens in nations that have as good a life, such as the EU9 and Japan. So there is a lot of room for reducing waste in the U.S. But how can it be done? The organizations that published this report blame the only two means of managing post-recycling MSW: **"Existing waste incinerators should be retired, and no new incinerators or landfills should be constructed."**

Unfortunately, such irresponsible recommendations are not being countered effectively and, as a result, major cities that have listened to such siren songs have had major waste management crises, for example Naples, Athens, and soon Rio de Janeiro and other megacities.

Regarding “trashing the climate”, in addition to being a big waste generator the U.S. also consumes twice as much electricity per capita than Japan and E.U. Halving the electricity use in the U.S. would reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 1,500 million tons of carbon dioxide, a GHG reduction that would be fifteen times greater than closing all landfills and incinerators. Why don't these organizations go after the utilities for generating more electricity than is actually needed for the good life? **"Half of the existing power plants should be retired, and no new power plants should be constructed."**

The claims made and the expectations in the report “Stop Trashing the Climate” are equally outlandish. A massive, and regrettably highly unlikely, change in living styles in the U.S. may reduce per capita energy consumption and MSW generation (actually these two functions correlate globally) to EU and Japan standards. Every possible effort could then be made to recycle as big a fraction of the remaining MSW as they do in Japan and the EU9; this is done in California where nearly 40% of their MSW is recycled but, still, they landfill 32 million tons of MSW or 0.58 tons/capita. After all possible waste reduction and waste recycling, there would still remain a post-recycling residue to be combusted in waste-to-energy plants (“incinerators”) or landfilled, hopefully under conditions that maximum recovery of biogas is practiced.

If all this were to be achieved in the U.S., what would be the amount of post-recycling MSW that would, still, have to be either combusted or landfilled? One hundred and twenty million tons, i.e. four times the amount of post-recycling MSW that now is combusted in waste-to-energy facilities.

Prof. Nickolas Themelis, Director, Earth Engineering Center, Columbia University in the City of New York
njt1@columbia.edu