

Waste-to-energy an important topic to explore

Albany Times Union Albany NY

First published: Thursday, September 4, 2008

Bruce Nauman of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute made some good points about U.S. energy independence in his Aug. 25 letter. However he didn't focus on our municipal solid wastes.

Each ton of that waste has the energy of about a barrel of oil. Clean waste-to-energy technologies should replace landfills where most of that energy is wasted, and greenhouse gas emissions are significant.

New waste-to-energy plants in Europe, that cleanly burn thousands of tons of municipal solid waste daily, have minimal emissions equal to those of a few cars. Europe provides heat and electricity to about 30 million people from cleanly burning wastes, conserving valuable energy resources. Their plants have high waste recycling rates, proving that recycling is compatible with waste-to-energy solutions.

Recycling has technical and economic limits. Zero waste is a goal, but zero waste does not yet exist anywhere in the world. Germany has a recycling rate of about 70 percent and can only recycle complex plastics by about 20 percent because of technical limitations. Much mixed plastics are going to China to be used as fuel.

Europe, Japan, Quebec, Vancouver, Minnesota and Florida have policies of zero waste to landfills, to stop pollution from landfills, and excessive greenhouse gas emissions. New York is way behind because of anti-technology policies advocated by those in our state administration.

Only good science and technology will solve our waste and energy problems, create new jobs, and help us to reduce our reliance on foreign fuels.

There will be an Eco Radio Environmental Exhibit at Empire State Plaza in Albany on Nov. 14-15 where the merits of waste-to-energy will be discussed and debated in a public forum.

Jack D. Lauber

Latham NY

The writer is an environmental engineer and a research associate at the Columbia University Earth Engineering Center.