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Blog: Green Inc. - Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line Reviving the Energy-From-Trash Concept

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By Kate Galbraith

Turning this into energy is getting a second-look these days, but not everyone thinks it's a good idea.

Waste Management, the garbage giant, wants to revive the idea of converting trash to electricity, but it is a controversial concept.

The company's latest efforts include a bid to build plants in China, a country which could soon seek 100 new plants of this type.

In the United States, no new waste-to-energy plants have been built for over a decade, but Waste Management is hoping to get approval to construct a new one in northeastern Maryland — though the plans have caused concerns among locals.

Essentially, the new plants would use high temperatures and extreme pressure to convert the trash into gas.

In Detroit, an effort is underway to close the city's waste-to-energy plant, which some residents link to unusually high asthma rates nearby.

“One of the claims these companies make is that it's clean and it's renewable, but it's actually neither if you look at it,” said Amy Perlmutter, a clean technology consultant based in Massachusetts. She argues that a far better investment would be improving recycling, which also reduces the impact on landfills.

Earlier this year, I spoke with Frank Ferraro, the vice president for technology at Wheelabrator Technologies, a wholly owned subsidiary of Waste Management. He said the waste-to-energy industry took off in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s as city landfills began to close and energy prices climbed.

But energy prices eventually came back down, and cities found that it made better economic sense to ship their waste to large regional landfills — even though they were further away.

Last year, when energy prices spiked, communities began entertaining the idea of waste-to-energy again. “With diesel fuel prices being relatively high, the cost to ship long distances became expensive,” said Mr. Ferraro. Also, with electricity prices high, communities could sell the electricity for more. Even though prices have come down, he said, “everybody feels that over time they are just going to continue to go up.”

Mr. Ferraro said that there are 87 waste-to-energy plants in the country, and Waste Management operates 16 of them. Many are near big cities, which generate plenty of trash, and they are particularly clustered in the Northeast due to high landfill fees.

To gird for the battle, the country’s main waste-to-energy industry association recently changed its name, from the Integrated Waste Services Association to the Energy Recovery Council.

Controversy over the technology is also brewing in Wales, where Covanta, which operates the Detroit plant, wants to build a large waste-to-energy plant but faces opposition from locals.

Waste Management is also eyeing the British market for new plants.

(Source: <http://greeninc.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/15/reviving-the-energy-from-trash-concept/>)