

Burning trash a success in the EU: Metro Vancouver board

Incinerators eliminate garbage while powering homes

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 27, 2011



Garbage is compacted at the 225 hectre Vancouver landfill in Delta. Metro Vancouver wants to lead a global charge against product packaging, saying it can't reach its ambitious recycling targets without the world's help.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

METRO VANCOUVER - A mass-burn incinerator sits along the Seine River in downtown Paris quietly turning the city's garbage into ash. Embassies in Copenhagen are a block away from a waste-to-energy plant. In Switzerland, 30 incinerators dot mostly densely populated valleys of the country.

People usually don't even know they're there, said Metro Vancouver director and Surrey Coun. Marvin Hunt.

Metro is pointing to the European Union, which has 450 mass-burn incinerators, as it pushes ahead with plans to investigate options for a \$450-million facility in or outside the Lower Mainland as part of its solid-waste management plan.

The plan recommends using waste "conversion technologies," such as anaerobic digestion, gasification or mass burn, to dispose of 500,000 tonnes of the region's garbage annually and generate heat and electricity.

"The reality is there's not an air quality issue here; the reality is there's a perception of an air quality issue," Hunt said. "We would be working at the same standards [as the EU] for this and you'd be having some of the best air coming out."

The City of Surrey has already expressed interest in building an incinerator in its centre, while New Westminster is reportedly eyeing a site within its boundaries.

U.S.-based Covanta Energy has also pitched a trash incinerator for Gold River, while there's another proposal for one on the Tsawwassen First Nation reserve.

The Paris plant, which opened in December 2007, treats more than 460,000 tonnes per year of household waste while producing 52 megawatts of electricity and district heating for about 79,000 houses and apartments.

"We'll be looking at the best emissions levels in the world and that's where we will start from," said Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore, chairman of Metro's waste-management committee.

Dennis Ranahan, Metro's division manager for solid waste planning, said waste-to-energy technologies are constantly evolving, making it easier to control emissions through high-temperature destruction of toxic materials, advanced emissions control systems to capture contaminants and better monitoring systems.

Upgrades to the Burnaby incinerator, which has been in place since 1988, have led to emissions below the Canadian standard, he noted.

But no incinerators will be emissions-free.

"You're still burning something somewhere; it depends on what the exact nature of the fuels that are burnt and what the emissions-control systems are," he said.

That's what worries Fraser Valley residents; they fear toxins will be spewed into their communities and trapped there, leading to potential health problems.

But B.C.'s chief medical officer Dr. Perry Kendall suggests the Fraser Valley's air quality issues could be more adversely affected by a growing population and increased traffic than incinerators, which can be controlled through proper emissions standards.

"Currently [Fraser Valley residents] do have a lot of emissions from Metro Vancouver and south of the border," Kendall said. "But plans to double the population base in the valley is going to contribute a significant amount of traffic. Without [better transit] this will contribute more to air quality than a well-managed plant can do."

Moore argues Metro will have to meet "prescriptive" emissions controls and conditions that include working with the Fraser Valley Regional District to address air quality concerns. Metro must also go through a competitive bid process for plant proposals both in and outside the Lower Mainland.

A 2005 Metro report found waste management only accounted for 0.3 per cent of emissions in the region. Heating accounted for 20 per cent, open burning for 15 per cent and non-road uses for 12 per cent.

Hunt said it will likely take at least three years before any project is contemplated, noting it has to go through extensive consultation with the public as well as the Fraser Valley. The incinerator is being proposed by Metro Vancouver to take the pressure off the Cache Creek dump, which is slated to close in 2016.

Metro Vancouver produces about 1.4 million tonnes of garbage every year. The draft solid-waste management plan aims to raise recycling rates from 55 per cent of garbage today to 70 per cent by 2015, with the remaining 30 per cent — about one million tonnes — burned or buried.

ksinoski@vancouversun.com