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Climate scientist defends incinerators

UVic prof argues Metro garbage burning plan trumps landfills

BY JEREMY SHEPHERD, NORTH SHORE NEWS AUGUST 3, 2011

Metro Vancouver's new plan to incinerate much of the region's trash may have some critics fuming, but at least one climate scientist is warming to the idea.

"This is an environmental solution, it's not an environmental problem," said Andrew Weaver, a climatologist from the University of Victoria who has participated in Metro's panel discussions on the issue. The new garbage plan, approved by the province last month, aims to divert 70 per cent of waste by 2020. A substantial portion of the remainder could be burnt, according to the region, as a way to keep it out of landfills.

The pollution caused by that process would be easy to regulate and "almost insignificant" relative to the smog caused by vehicles and agricultural burning, said Weaver. "In terms of air quality, this is not a big deal."

Approximately 55 per cent of garbage in Metro Vancouver is currently recycled or diverted, leaving more than one million tonnes of non-recyclable garbage. Sending that to the dump is a serious problem, said Weaver.

"When you stick the stuff in landfills, it doesn't just stay there forever, it decomposes. . . and in doing so produces methane," he said. Methane is a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, the primary product of incineration.

District of North Vancouver Mayor Darrell Mussatto, a member of the Metro Vancouver Waste Management Committee, made a similar argument.

"We're not talking about the incineration of 25 years ago," said Mussatto. "We're talking about the new state-of-the-art technology today which many places in the world are employing. They have one in downtown Paris."

But Ben West, a campaigner for Wilderness Committee, a Vancouver environmental group, said these points are illogical.

"I don't see how an argument that there's already a lot of other sources of toxins we're being exposed to is an argument to add more toxins to the environment," he said.

According to West, the marketing has changed more than the technology.

"The stuff that's in our garbage is particularly problematic because we really don't know what it is that we're even mixing. You could have any number of different chemicals being blended together in an incinerator and then being released from a smokestack," he said. "About a third of what comes out the incinerator ends up going to a landfill, because this ash has to be stored somewhere."

West said he would protest incineration through door-to-door canvassing, community meetings or YouTube videos.

"If you can think of it, we'll do it," he said.

Weaver said such action would be counter-productive, and that it isn't based in science.

"The problem with it is it trumps up public fear," he said. "It's another example of science being misused for ideological purposes."

jshepherd@nsnews.com

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