

RESPONDING TO THE REGION

The Rest of the Story

Following is a list of questions and answers taken directly from Durham Region's energy-from-waste brochure (distributed to the public by their Works Department). After each question and answer from the Region, we provide the facts that are missing. For more information or to request the references for this article, please email Kristin McKinnon-Rutherford at krispoo@sympatico.ca.

1. You say that the new facility will produce energy. What kind and how much?

Durham Region: Similar thermal facilities in Europe are producing both electricity and heat in the form of steam or hot water that can be used for heating systems. The primary purpose of our facility will be to process the household waste (garbage) left over after diversion efforts such as recycling and composting.

The benefit of a thermal waste facility is that it produces steam that can be used as a heat and energy source for your homes. A thermal facility processing 250,000 tonnes per year of municipal waste will create enough energy to power approximately 15,000 homes. From an individual households perspective, the garbage left over after recycling and composting can produce enough electricity to run that households energy efficient lights.

What they aren't saying: Burning garbage is a very inefficient way to create energy. Three times the energy can be saved by recycling paper, five times by recycling plastics and six times by recycling textiles.¹ Recycling saves energy because materials that are diverted can be re-used. Burned materials are gone forever and must be replaced – which uses much more energy than incineration creates.²

Compared to other methods of creating energy, incineration is also the dirtiest, contributing the most to greenhouse gases.³

DID YOU KNOW?

The incinerator industry has a documented history of overestimating the money to be made on energy sales. When energy profits fail, operating costs go up and residents usually pick up the slack in the form of higher taxes.

2. What is the size of the proposed facility?

Durham Region: The proposed energy-from-waste facility will be designed for somewhere between a minimum capacity of 150,000 tonnes and a maximum capacity of 400,000 tonnes of waste per year. This maximum capacity was calculated to allow for future population growth within the Regions.

What they aren't saying: The operators of the incinerator can request an increase in tonnage from the Ministry of the Environment⁴, making the 400,000 tonne maximum meaningless.

DID YOU KNOW?

Montgomery County, Maryland residents saw their taxes go up 55% to cover energy revenue shortfalls at the incinerator in their community.

In Claremont, New Hampshire, a dispute between a regional waste incinerator and the communities it served resulted in 29 nearby towns filing for bankruptcy. Bankruptcy court denied Claremont's claim and they had to raise taxes to cover their incinerator debts and contracts.

If we fall below the 150,000 tonne minimum, the Region may have to pay fines to the incinerator operators. Historically, taxpayers cover these financial penalties through raised taxes.⁵ It is also not uncommon for communities hosting incinerators to go bankrupt because operating costs are often higher than expected and municipalities are fined for not providing enough garbage to be incinerated.⁶

3. What if there isn't enough residential garbage to keep the thermal treatment facility working? Are you looking to accept garbage from other municipalities?

Durham Region: The operation of this facility does not depend on waste from outside Durham and York Regions. In 2005, Durham and York Regions shipped approximately 350,000 tonnes of residential waste to landfill, waste that could have potentially been processed at a thermal facility. In 2006, Durham and York Regions shipped roughly 330,000 tonnes.

What they aren't saying: According to Durham's 2006 Annual Report, 133,896 metric tonnes of waste went to landfill. This means that of the 330,000 tonnes noted in the answer above, 196,104 tonnes of that garbage figure comes from York Region.

Yet, York Region has committed to sending only 20,000 tonnes of garbage to our incinerator. Taking the 133,896 tonnes from Durham Region and the 20,000 tonnes from York gives us a total of 153,896 tonnes of garbage for burning, not 330,000.

Durham Region's *total* waste tonnage in 2006 was 239,663. Of this we diverted 44% - or 105,767 tonnes - through recycling and composting and sent 56% - or 133,896 - to landfill. If we increased our diversion rate to 70%, which many regions have easily achieved, we would have 71,899 tonnes (30% x 239,663) of waste needing disposal.¹ Add York's 20,000 tonnes and our total comes to 91,899. So why do we need an incinerator with a *minimum* 150,000 and maximum 400,000 tonne capacity?

A number of products collected elsewhere are not recycled in Durham Region. If we were to institute a comprehensive diversion program that includes all recyclable products and engages our industrial, commercial and institutional sectors, Durham Region would see a significant reduction in the amount of garbage we have to send to landfill or incineration.

If we go below the minimum tonnage required by agreement with incinerator operators, we definitely will be forced to take in garbage from other municipalities or risk financial penalties from incinerator operators.

DID YOU KNOW?

Some jurisdictions, like Sweden, have had to actually import waste to keep incinerators going.

Ironically, Sweden exports the ash that results from incineration because it is so toxic that it cannot be legally landfilled in their own country. If the European Union bans the export of this type of waste - which is expected - Sweden will have nowhere to put its ash.

Sweden introduced a tax on municipal incineration in 2006 in order to encourage recycling.

4. Will the air emissions from the thermal facility be safe?

Durham Region: The emissions that you see coming out of the stacks of these types of thermal facilities are mostly water vapour. Thermal facilities have strict monitoring programs in place to ensure the safety and protection of human health and the environment. The air emissions from our facility will meet, or exceed, ALL of the strict guidelines and standards set out by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

What they aren't saying: What we need to be concerned about is what we *can't* see coming out of the stacks. One incinerator in Sweden, for example, annually releases 58 tons of nitrogen oxide, 11.5 tons of sulphur, .82 tons of particulates, 3.5 tons of hydrogen chloride, 1.3 kg of mercury, .17 kg of cadmium, 1.8 kg of lead and .024 grams of dioxins into the atmosphere.⁷

DID YOU KNOW?

Incinerator emissions are bad for us all, but pose a particularly high risk to developing children. Experts agree that the unborn child and infants who are breast-feeding are the most at risk of exposure, taking in 50 times more pollutants than adults relative to their weight.

In a recent report, one author identified a minimum of 53 pollutants emitted by incinerators that are toxic to fetuses and young children, including developmental, neuro, respiratory, reproductive, endocrine and immunotoxins, carcinogens and hormone disruptors.

¹ Thank you to Barry Bracken for providing these calculations.

Sweden's numbers only include the emissions that they actually measure. Over 200 chemicals, contaminants and pollutants – many of which are dangerous toxins - have been identified in the incinerator emissions.⁸ And the toxic effects of 88 to 90% of the chemicals released in emissions are unstudied and / or unknown.⁹

Regulations in place are limited and inadequate. The Ministry of the Environment requires the monitoring of only 8 contaminants emitted by incinerators.¹⁰ Of these allowed contaminants, cadmium, lead, mercury and dioxins are associated with four or more toxic effects on children.¹¹

The Ministry requires testing for these 8 chemicals only once within the first 6 months of operation and once a year thereafter. If an incinerator operator manages to keep dioxin and furan levels low for 5 years, they no longer have to test for them annually. Yet, dioxins and furans have been recognized internationally as two of the twelve most dangerous pollutants on the planet.¹²

5. Will this facility release dioxins?

Durham Region: These facilities emit very small quantities of dioxins but these chemicals are also emitted by other sources as well. The annual quantity of dioxins emitted by thermally treating the residual waste from a typical household is equivalent to that same household burning approximately 15 logs in a woodstove or fireplace.

What they aren't saying: Whether or not dioxins are emitted by other sources is not at issue. What is at issue is that, for at least 35 years, an incinerator will be adding more dioxins into our atmosphere and our bodies... not to mention the hundreds of other contaminants that incinerators emit into our environment (see our answer to question 4).

DID YOU KNOW?

*There is no safe dose of dioxins. Dioxins affect us at a molecular level and are toxic at concentrations of one part per trillion – "a drop in 300 Olympic-sized swimming pools."
May 31, 2007 – Toronto STAR*

6. Will this new facility work in conjunction with our recycling and composting programs or will it discourage waste diversion efforts?

Durham Region: Our facility will manage ONLY the waste remaining after our diversion efforts. Waste diversion is a high priority for both Durham and York Regions. Through your efforts, Durham Region is now diverting more than 50 per cent of waste through the Blue Box and Green Bin programs. This number continues to climb. Durham Regional Council has committed to diverting 60 per cent of its waste by 2010. As such, the proposed thermal treatment facility is only being designed to handle Durham's residual waste AFTER 60 per cent diversion of waste has already been achieved.

Our efforts at diverting even more waste from landfill are increasing. We expect diversion to increase to 60 per cent when the integrated waste management program is rolled out to the remaining municipalities of Clarington, Scugog, Uxbridge and Brock. This full program will incorporate the major services currently in place in Ajax, Oshawa, Pickering and Whitby. This includes diversion through the Green Bin program (kitchen organics composting), Blue Box recyclables program (paper, cans, plastics), and composting of Leaf and Yard Waste. These municipalities have the benefit of our integrated waste management program consisting of weekly Blue Box and Green Bin collection with residual waste collection once every two weeks. And so, no, this facility will not discourage waste diversion from landfill.

DID YOU KNOW?

Durham Region's claim that market demand is to blame for its limited recycling efforts does not hold up under close scrutiny. There are many companies across Ontario and the US that purchase recycled materials not currently collected in Durham Region.

Two thirds of the waste landfilled in Ontario is created by the commercial, industrial and institutional sectors, yet Durham Region does not have programs in place to encourage and enhance recycling in these sectors.

What they aren't saying: (Please also see our answer to question 4.)

Because incinerators must run 24/7, they require an ongoing supply of garbage in order to operate, a scenario that does nothing to support separation and recycling.¹³ The motivation to reduce, reuse and recycle is further hampered by arrangements that require municipalities to pay penalties if the guaranteed amount of waste is not provided for incineration.¹⁴

Incinerators also consume so much of local solid waste budgets that little money is left over for comprehensive recycling and compost programs.¹⁵

7. Will there be any water pollution from this facility - surface and/or groundwater?

Durham Region: No, there will be no water pollution associated with this facility. There is no process associated with a thermal treatment facility that comes into contact with any surface or groundwater. Any water or other matter that may be discharged into the sewer system will be treated on site and will meet all of the requirements of the municipal sewer-use by-laws and the Ontario Water Resources Act.

What they aren't saying: The chemicals and pollutants released into the atmosphere as a result of incineration are very persistent. They evaporate and travel long distances through air and water. They can jump around the globe, riding the wind and particles of dust, settling to the earth in cool spots and then vaporizing and moving on again. Some of the most persistent chemicals can travel hundreds or thousands of kilometres.¹⁶ There is no question that these contaminants would, subsequently, make their way into Lake Ontario and other bodies of water in and around Durham Region. They will also contaminate our soils, enter our food chain and make their way into our bodies.¹⁷

8. Will this facility process household hazardous waste?

Durham Region: Many common household items contain hazardous materials such as lead, mercury and cadmium, and are therefore classified as household hazardous waste (HHW). All residents are urged to do their part in keeping our neighbourhoods clean and safe by bringing HHW to a licensed drop-off depot. The Region operates four such depots, they are located in Oshawa, Scugog, Brock, and Pickering. In addition, the Region of Durham hosts four e-waste and two HHW collection events every year at various locations across the Region of Durham where residents can drop off these materials free of charge.

What they aren't saying: The products we use today are made up of so many different substances that we really have no idea what we would be burning (think of the toxic toys that have recently been recalled). We know even less about what happens when we combine and then burn these substances.¹⁸

The Ministry of Environment's own guidelines identify a number of dangerous toxins that can result when garbage doesn't burn properly or completely. Even though these toxins present a danger to child development, mandatory testing is not required.¹⁹

DID YOU KNOW?

Nova Scotia is moving towards its vision of a truly sustainable economy, leading North America and the world in its innovation. Between 1996 and 2004, this strategy resulted in:

- A network of 84 Enviro-Depots and five Regional Processing Centres.
- Centralized composting for the business sector in 53 of 55 municipalities.
- Recycling of 259,000 litres of paint in 2004 alone.
- Diversion of 5.6 million tires from landfill.
- Reduction of landfills by 75% and the end of all open burning.
- Creation of 1,300 jobs through recycling and by turning waste into resources.
- In 2001 alone, raised \$9 million through their deposit / refund system for bottles and achieved a return rate of 80%.

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