

Durham on its own when it comes to waste management policy

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DURHAM -- A clear and concise policy on waste management -- Ontario doesn't have one.

The Netherlands has a national policy on waste management which is understood, implemented and sets out a hierarchy.

While investigating energy-from-waste facilities in Europe, delegates from Durham and York regions heard from ministry officials about the importance of all levels of government looking in the same direction.

"We seem to have public acceptance with respect to energy recovery from waste, thermal treatment or incineration," said Cliff Curtis, Durham Region's commissioner of works. "We don't have any policy in place at the provincial level to support that as of yet."

The Netherlands' waste management policy is where that country has a big advantage over Ontario, according to Mr. Curtis.

"They had a clear national policy that endorses energy recovery from waste and has for a number of years," he said. "Because of their restricted land requirements, they don't want to waste land on landfill, so there is a clear national bias towards recovering the energy from waste and minimizing what had to go to landfill."

The Netherlands is small, one-third the size of Ontario, but because the area is so densely populated landfilling was not an option.

"All over this country there is a shortage of land, so we can't afford to have a lot of landfill," said Ton Holtkamp from the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment in the Netherlands (VRON).

"The different noses... from the provincial authority and the local authority, should be in the same direction so there is a consensus of what has to be done."

Municipalities in the Netherlands must have a waste master plan that is in line with national goals.

"We have an experience of over 20 years of dealing with waste in the Netherlands," Mr. Holtkamp said. "I think in what I read in the papers in Canada you are in the position now we had say 10 or 15 years ago and you need an integrated approach on waste management."

The integrated approach begins with residents and industry creating as little waste as possible. This is the highest rung on the hierarchy of waste management -- prevention.

This is followed by product reuse and then recycling. It is only after all attempts are made to fulfil these steps in the hierarchy that incineration with energy recovery becomes an option. The least desirable option and the lowest rung on the hierarchy is landfilling.

"I think it is a very useful framework because it enables a discussion to take place on what our public priorities should be," Mr. Curtis said. "I think their ladder of desirability has applications here as well."

Producer responsibility also factors into the waste management plan in the form of things such as a vehicle end-of-life tax, which is half of one percent of a vehicle's purchase price. The tax pays for the

disposal of the vehicle when the time comes.

"The producer themselves, they don't pay. It is the consumer who pays," said VRON representative Cees Veerma.

In Malmo, Sweden, the manager of the energy department at the Sysav facility there, Jonas Eek, explained they, too, have an effective producer responsibility system where the makers of products such as bottles are responsible for recycling them after residents deliver them to recycling depots.

Throughout Malmo, there are 15 recycling centres where residents take various materials.

"You have to put the pressure on the hierarchy and also recover waste from energy," Mr. Holtkamp said.

In Canada, waste policy is not a federal issue, rather, it's a provincial one.

"We don't have a clear policy from the Province on the hierarchy ladder," Mr. Curtis explained. "We have a clear indication from society that they really aren't that interested in having landfill sites."

He said a framework such as the one that exists in the Netherlands would enable a discussion to take place on what public priorities should be.

"I think their ladder of desirability has applications here as well," Mr. Curtis said. "Minimizing packaging was really high, which is where we are supposed to be, as well as reuse and recycling."

The lack of direction could prove to be an issue, according to Mr. Curtis, but not one that is insurmountable.

"Things would be a lot easier if we did have a clear provincial policy statement on it," he said.

"We may be able to find some congruence between the energy recovery from waste and our current thrust toward getting alternate sources of energy from the Ministry of Energy," Mr. Curtis said. "So there seems to be some congruency between the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Energy right now, which we may be able to capitalize on but we don't have a clear policy statement from the Province on energy from waste."

But, despite having no policy, Mr. Curtis said Durham is prepared to go it on its own.

"We are proceeding in the absence of clear policy direction," he said. "We are trying to demonstrate that this is the right thing to do."

He suspects the Province isn't quite ready to get into banning landfills because there remain a number of large landfills with a lot of capacity.

"A landfill, given our current technology, is still much cheaper. It is the cheapest disposal option we have available, even though it is lowest on the hierarchy of desirability," Mr. Curtis said. "So I think landfill will be filling a fairly large role in the provincial waste disposal strategy for the immediate future. We would like to demonstrate that there is a more environmentally friendly alternative."