

INCINERATORS ARE IMPEDING THE TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABILITY

[Rachel's introduction: In the U.S. and worldwide, waste incinerators are once again popping up like poisonous mushrooms. As each new incinerator is built, the hope for a sustainable economy fades further into the distance.]

By Peter Montague

Across the U.S. -- and, indeed, across the world -- waste incinerators are making a comeback. Why? Because there's a huge amount of money to be made.

Globally, government officials are proposing to spend hundreds of billions of tax dollars to build a new generation of incinerators. In some cases, government officials are merely naive about the huge problems incinerators create, but in other cases officials seem to have been seduced by all that money.

During the 1980s, every state in the U.S. was targeted for several waste incinerators -- "waste to energy" plants, as they were known at that time. (The incinerator industry has always called its machines something besides "incinerators.") These incinerators burned garbage or medical waste and they were filthy, dangerous, expensive, unreliable, materials-destroying, energy-wasting contraptions -- and citizen groups all across the country got organized and managed to stop more than 90% of the proposed incinerators. It was a huge victory and a convincing demonstration that sensible change can occur when a loose coalition of committed, organized citizens makes it happen.

Now a new generation of incinerators is being proposed, but the name has been changed again. Instead of "waste to energy" plants we now have proposals for gasification plants, pyrolysis machines, and plasma arc facilities. These are nothing more than "incinerators in disguise" -- which is the title of an important [new report](#) from [Greenaction](#) and [GAIA](#) -- the two best-known and most effective incinerator- fighters in the U.S. and arguably around the world. (Greenaction is run by Bradley Angel with offices in California, Arizona and Utah. GAIA is run by Manny Colonzo, with offices in Quezon City, Philippines, and Berkeley, Calif.)

There are basically two problems with incinerators -- no matter what name you may give them. First, they produce dangerous wastes in the form of gases and ash, often creating entirely new hazards, like dioxins and furans, that were not present in the raw waste.

Secondly -- and even more importantly -- incinerators destroy materials that must then be replaced. If I burn a piece of paper instead of recycling it, someone has to manufacture a new piece of paper from raw materials. This is tremendously wasteful because manufacturing one ton of paper creates 98 tons of waste products.[1,pg.51] On average, for every ton of products destroyed in an incinerator, 71 tons of waste must be created somewhere else to re- create those products -- mine wastes, forest wastes, transportation wastes, energy wastes, and so on.[2] ("Waste to energy" incinerators don't even make

sense from an energy perspective. For every unit of energy recovered by one of these machines, three to 5 units of energy could have been saved by recycling the products instead of destroying them in an incinerator and then replacing them with new ones. [3, pg. 26])

By destroying useful resources that must then be replaced, incinerators -- including plasma arc, pyrolysis, and gasification -- make our waste problems far worse than they would otherwise be. Incinerators prevent us from adopting sensible modern ways of doing business, namely "[zero waste](#)" and "[clean production](#)."

This is why fighting incinerators is so crucially important -- incinerators are dinosaurs that prevent us from making the transition to a modern lifestyle based on resource conservation and clean production. If we don't win the fight against incinerators -- in the U.S. and worldwide -- we will never be able to make the transition to a sustainable economy.

People who think we can make the transition to a sustainable economy without stopping incinerators (in all their forms) are badly mistaken.

Once you build an incinerator, you must "feed the machine" for the next 40 years to get your investment back. Once you build an incinerator, resource conservation, recycling and waste reduction become "the enemy" because the machine must have a new load of fresh garbage every day. The machine needs waste, so its very existence serves as a major deterrent to less wasteful life styles and ways of doing business. In sum: incinerators promote waste. They thrive on waste. They need waste. They demand waste, Incinerators are a major deterrent to clean production, full recycling, resource conservation, zero waste, and a sustainable economy.

So why would anyone in their right mind want to build an incinerator? The answer is simple: money. Lots of money.

An incinerator costs anywhere from \$100 million to \$500 million to build. For argument's sake, let's say an incinerator costs \$200 million. That money comes from the public treasury. Local governments do not often see such large bundles of money flowing through budgets -- so an incinerator offers a unique opportunity for local politicians and their friends to take their cut, and it's perfectly legal. Bankers, accountants, lawyers, engineers, consultants, realtors and political "fixers" can all scoop off their small percentage. Even one tenth of one percent of \$200 million is \$200,000 dollars. So an incinerator project causes money to slosh around in the local economy in ways that no other public works project is ever likely to do. At election time, some of that money may kick back as campaign contributions to the officials who made the decision to incinerate local waste. All perfectly legal. But not good for democracy, human health, the natural environment, or the future.

People who are engaged on the front lines of an incinerator fight will want to get a copy of the new report from Greenaction and GAIA, "[Incinerators in Disguise](#)." (And they will also want see the earlier report from GAIA and the [Institute for Local Self Reliance](#), [Resources](#)

[Up in Flames.](#))

The "Incinerators in Disguise" report offers case studies of modern incinerator technologies and how they are "sold" to communities. As you read through this report, a pattern emerges: the people selling gasification, pyrolysis, and plasma arc incinerators all seem to use similar techniques:

1. They are likely to claim that their machines produce no pollution whatsoever. Obviously this is physically impossible, but this does not stop them from making the bogus claim. Often local officials accept these impossible claims without question.
2. Government officials often exempt these machines from laws requiring environmental assessments. The machines may be given licenses to operate without an examination of any performance data whatsoever. (Could this be the money effect at work? It's a fair question.)
3. Some companies are selling machines with which they have absolutely no experience. They are selling something that is entirely unknown and experimental, though they may claim (or imply) that they have years of experience with similar machines. Deep skepticism is justified.
4. Companies may describe their machines as "commercial successes" even after their machines have failed to operate properly during multi-year tests and have been permanently shut down and abandoned, incurring major financial losses for the companies.

In sum, every industry has some "bad apples" who cut corners, misrepresent the truth, and falsify information. But the incinerator industry seems to have far more than its fair share of "bad apples." This was as true 25 years ago as it is today. For some reason -- perhaps it's just the easy money -- bad apples seem to dominate this industry.

This is especially regrettable because this is an industry whose money-making schemes can prevent us all from reaching the world we are all working to achieve -- the world of resource conservation, zero waste, and sustainability.

Hats off to Greenaction and GAIA for once again blowing the whistle on these nefarious junkyard dogs!

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[1] Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins. [Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution](#). And see <http://www.natcap.org/>

[2] John E. Young and Aaron Sachs, [The Next Efficiency Revolution: Creating a Sustainable Materials Economy](#). Washington, D.C. Worldwatch Institute, 1994, pg. 13.

[3] Brenda Platt, [Resources Up in Flames: The Economic Pitfalls of Incineration versus a Zero Waste Approach in the Global South](#). Quezon City, Philippines, 2004), pg. 26.