



March 7, 2010

Burn plants seem cleaner, but facts debated

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Poughkeepsie Journal

Every year, Dutchess County's trash-burning incinerator in the Town of Poughkeepsie releases 3,777 tons of global-warming carbon dioxide, along with 333 tons of soot, sulfur compounds and various other pollutants, according to environmental reports.

It also produces 50,000 tons of ash — one for every three tons of trash burned — that have to be hauled to faraway landfills.

Officials of the Dutchess County Resource Recovery Agency, a public authority that runs the plant, have long contended the burn plant is better for the environment than dumping trash in landfills. Though published scientific data exist to support the claim about so-called waste-to-energy or WTE plants, which produce electricity, there are also data on the other side.

Consider these dueling conclusions in the bury-or-burn debate:

- A February 2009 article in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* concluded that well-controlled trash-burning "appears to be a better option" because it produces more energy than gas-recovery systems at landfills and emits less soot, sulfur dioxides, nitrogen oxides and greenhouse gases.

"If the goal is greenhouse gas reduction, then WTE should be considered as an option under U.S. renewable energy policies," the article said. It noted that the plants produce more hydrogen chloride, however; the Dutchess plant emits 33 tons a year.

- A study performed for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, meantime, compared ways to decrease emissions of greenhouse gases and found landfilling three times more effective than modern trash-burning.

The study used actual emissions from WTE plants, which are "far higher" than data based on computer models; the *Environmental Science* report used models. The Massachusetts study was mixed otherwise, however: Landfills emitted more particulates, acids and toxics but gave off fewer carcinogens.

After the study's release, the state extended a moratorium on incineration and announced plans to require higher recycling rates in WTE communities.