

TO BURN OR NOT TO BURN?

Some critics of waste-to-energy plants are afraid that burning waste will hamper recycling programs. If everyone sends their trash to a waste-to-energy plant, they say, there will be little incentive to recycle.

Recently, a study of cities that have both recycling programs and waste-to-energy plants showed higher recycling rates than other cities in the U.S. Why would these cities recycle more when they burn their trash? The results showed that people living in cities with waste-to-energy plants are more educated about municipal solid waste and strongly support their recycling programs.

So, while at first glance, recycling and waste-to-energy seem to be at odds, they can actually complement each other. That's because it makes good sense to recycle some materials, and better sense to burn others.

Let's look at aluminum, for example. Aluminum ore is so expensive to mine that recycling aluminum more than pays for itself. Burning it produces no energy. Also, because aluminum melts at a low temperature, it can clog up the works in a waste-to-energy plant. So clearly, aluminum is valuable to recycle and not useful to burn.

Paper, on the other hand, can either be burned or recycled—it all depends on the price the used paper will bring. Around 15 years ago, the East Coast experienced a glut of old newspapers. Some East Coast communities were paid almost nothing for the paper they collected. And some communities couldn't find anyone who wanted to buy their old newspapers, so they ended up paying a trucking company to haul the newspapers to a landfill!

In these cases, burning the newspapers for their energy value would have been a good alternative. Other types of paper, such as those using colored inks and glossy finishes, are not easily recycled and usually should be burned for their energy content.

Plastics are another matter. Because plastics are made from petroleum and natural gas, they are excellent sources of energy for waste-to-energy plants. This is especially true since plastics are not as easy to recycle as steel, aluminum, or paper. Plastics almost always have to be hand sorted and making a product from recycled plastics may cost more than making it from new materials.

To burn or not to burn is not really the question. We can use both recycling and waste-to-energy as alternatives to landfilling.