



DON'T TALK rubbish

Burning waste and filling holes in the ground is dangerous, expensive and unnecessary. Recycling, in contrast, not only protects the environment, it also creates jobs. **Robin Murray** reports

LAST YEAR, A GROUP OF environmentalists visited the home of the Chair of Manchester's waste disposal body and a proponent of waste incineration. Under the cover of night, they sorted the contents of his dustbin into neat piles on the front lawn. When dawn came, it revealed that over four fifths of his waste was readily recyclable, either through composting or as 'recovered materials' for local manufacturing industry.

The greens' argument in Manchester has been twofold. First, burning waste in municipal incinerators is a major cause of pollution and resource depletion. Second, composting organic waste returns nutrients to the soil, while recycling the materials conserves primary resources and cuts back on the large quantities of energy needed to extract and process forest timber, aluminium and steel.

Over the past 15 years, these arguments have been at the centre of one of the most divisive local issues in the developed world. In the United States, campaigners have blocked over 300 proposals for incinerators since 1985, and the number still operating fell from 170 to 120 during the 1990s. In Germany, plans to build 120 incinerators 10 years ago met such fierce opposition that only 19 have been built. Many North American and European governments have banned them (see box right).

Waste incinerators were first built in the UK at the turn of the century. What is new is the toxicity of modern waste and the awareness of the impact of burning it. The incineration of paints, batteries, pesticides, aerosols, TVs, computers and treated textiles releases chemicals that enter the food chain, contaminate breast milk and are considered such a threat that the World Health Organisation earlier this year called for them to be phased out.

Highly toxic dioxins are one of the principal causes for concern. They are emitted when materials such as PVC are incinerated. Dioxins led to waste scandals in France and Germany, and to the closing down of the Belgian food industry two months ago because of contamination in animal feed. Britain has the second highest levels of dioxin and furan emissions in Europe, according to a 1997 study, 80 per cent of them derived from waste disposal (primarily incineration).

Only last month, The World Wide Fund for Nature reported that two-month-old British infants are taking in 42 times the safe level of dioxins in breast milk. Dioxins are only one of many emissions from incinerators that have led to the waste alert. Recent data on emissions from the two London incinerators show that they are major contributors to health problems from atmospheric pollution in London. In response to such evidence, the European Union is further tightening up on permitted levels of incinerator emissions from the chimneys. But cutting emissions from the chimneys merely forces the toxics into the ash. It does not destroy them.

And landfilling our waste is not preferable to incinerating it. Many studies from North America and Europe suggest that landfill sites are a threat to the health of neighbourhoods, and are associated with abnormal levels of cancer. They also contribute nearly half of the greenhouse gas, methane, emitted in the UK.

Rather, the accumulating evidence indicates that we can no longer treat waste in

the way we have done for a century, as something to be got rid of in the quickest, cheapest and least intrusive way. Waste scares, like food scares are generating a new environmental politics.

They are also leading to a new environmental economics. A revolution has been taking place in the way we deal with waste and in the materials we use to make products in the first place. The starting point is recycling and making sure that household and commercial waste finds its way into compost sites, paper factories and material processors.

It involves a whole new workforce, requires new technologies and new factories and stimulates development of new products.

Many of the innovators have been community groups. They have proved the most effective interface between a system which depends on householder involvement and large processing factories, and have developed radically new collection technologies, sorting systems and, in some cases, material processing. The Community Recycling Network (CRN) which links 180 recycling groups, is the single largest kerbside →



ACTION ON INCINERATION

Some anti-incinerator groups are close to a decade old, but a large number have been formed in the past few years in response to local plans to build incinerators, writes *Sarah Efron*. Although these organisations are locally-based, they are becoming increasingly linked up through the following national groups:

Communities Against Toxics (CAT)

Since CAT was formed in 1990, it has helped 26 communities defeat incinerator proposals. CAT provides information and legal advice to community groups and individuals about incineration, and publishes a magazine, *ToxCat*. There are branches in Pontypool, South Wales, Goole, East Riding, Manchester, Southampton, and various other communities around the country.

Tel: 0151 339 5473, email: ralph@tcpublications.freemove.co.uk

Community Incineration Network

This group has formed in the past few months to link community groups fighting incineration proposals and expansions. The group shares ideas and strategies with people around the country, and lobbies MPs. Tel: 01303 265737.

Friends of the Earth

Around 50 of the 230 local branches of FoE are actively campaigning against incineration and for the reduction and reuse of waste. FoE has a 140-page campaign guide on incineration, (free to community groups), which includes information about media strategy and planning regulations.

Tel: 0171 490 1555. Email: info@foe.co.uk. Website: www.foe.co.uk

There are over 50 individual community groups active in opposing incinerators in Britain. Here are a few of them.

BAD AIR (Bexley and District Against Incineration Risks)

An umbrella group of people fighting incinerators in the London Borough of Bexley. The group is anticipating the announcement of plans to build the largest waste incinerator in Britain. Residents have already fought off two attempts to do so over the past decade in this area which already has two sewage incinerators. Tel: 01322 442265.

ARROW, Lancashire

Skelmersdale's abandoned quarries made it an easy target for landfills. The city is home to 12 landfill sites, which import waste from Manchester, Liverpool and Cumbria. After residents started to notice serious health problems related to the landfill, the County

Council decided to move towards a new method of dealing with waste – incineration. ARROW has been fighting the County to consider recycling and waste reduction.

Tel: 01695 721915/50504. Email: clairejr@cableinet.co.uk. Website: www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/arrow/index.htm

Ban The Burner, Portsmouth, Hampshire

This is an ad hoc group formed when plans were announced to build a new incinerator on the site of an abandoned burner in central Portsmouth. The burner is to be one of three in the region.

Tel: 01705 734555

The Old Heath Environmental Protection Association, Colchester, Essex

This was originally formed in opposition to increased lorry routes in South East Colchester, but it sprang back into action in response to Essex's local waste plan. The proposal includes eight possible incineration sites, and has generated 10,000 objections.

Tel: 01206 794 644. District Councils have formed a consortium to oppose incineration. In April, Essex County Council agreed with the Districts to aim for 60 per cent recycling by 2003.

Surrey Mirror

A local newspaper, *The Surrey Mirror*, decided to take an active role in the fight against an incinerator planned near Redhill. The site, on a remote hilltop, had already been rejected as an incineration site after a public inquiry four years ago. The paper is running regular articles on the dangers of the incinerator, and is collecting signatures for a petition.

Tel: 01737 732 266. Email: editor@surreymirror.co.uk. Website: www.surreymirror.co.uk

Grain Trade Association

The Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association has been working with Friends of the Earth to fight plans for two energy-from-waste incinerators and a landfill site for incinerator ash in Belfast. They fear the sites could contaminate grain used to feed animals which, in turn, could have serious repercussions throughout the food chain.

The Grain Trade Association is based in Belfast. Tel: 01846 611044.

OTHER LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

SKI, Stop Kidderminster Incinerator, Worcestershire
Tel: 01562 754 948. Email: BDBrooks@aol.com

Clydeside Against Pollution, Scotland
Tel: 0141 886 4527

Don't let them Schhh... on Britain.

Let your Tackles-Who campaign the nation's newspapers to be free of over Britain. Help to make Schhh... like their homes look. Contact: Friends of the Earth.

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CAMPAIGN POSTER



→ collector of recyclates in the UK (see box page 22).

The challenge they face is to how to get access to the capital, markets and integrated local authority contracts required by the switch to recycling. The CRN has formed its own sales consortia, operates a network consultancy service, has developed model contracts and helped design new vehicles, and provides an international information and technology search function for its members. That goes some way to meet the demands for scale.

What it has shown is that decentralised, community-based producers are more effective in achieving high recycling rates than large centralised companies and have introduced more radical, low-cost innovations. They have also been major generators of local jobs which require a wide range of skills. They talk of a new profession of 'green collar workers'.

INTENSIVE RECYCLING IS A CREATION OF the 1990s. Since 1990 the municipal recycling rate in the US has gone from 8 per cent to 31 per cent. In Seattle it rose to 48 per cent. In 60 Californian local authorities it has reached 50-80 per cent. In Europe a number of German *länder* have reached 50 per cent, and Switzerland 54 per cent. Holland is now recycling 73 per cent of all its waste. This amounts to the discovery in our dustbins of what amounts to whole new territories of forests, mines and quarries.

As a result there has been a change in the geography of resources. The balance in the paper industry is shifting from the Northern forest countries like Scandinavia and Canada, to the main paper consumers, the US, Britain and Germany. Cities, which are centres of consumption, have suddenly discovered that they are rich in resources. Thirty five mini-recycled-paper mills have been built in US cities in the 1990s, including a large community-owned newsprint mill in the Bronx, the first factory to open there since the 1940s.

Recycling is proving an ideal tool for job creation. In Germany, a recent stockbroker's survey found that 150,000 people

Waste scares, like food scares, are generating a new environmental politics. They are also leading to a new environmental economics.

were employed in the waste and recycling industries, more than in telecommunications or steel.

This is the first stage in 'reinventing waste'. Germany has already moved to a second stage. In 1996 it passed the Close Loop Economy Law which encouraged not only recycling but a new approach to material and product design. The idea is to reduce the quantity of materials used and wasted in any production process, to encourage the use of materials which are easy to recycle, and to design products which no longer depend on hazardous materials. The chemical industry in particular is being forced to retrace its steps. For example, starch and sugar have been substituted for petroleum in plastics, and enzymes have replaced phosphates in 90 per cent of detergents in Europe. Recycling is then just a step to a much more far-reaching green industrial revolution.

Public policy has a central role in this transition. Governments are establishing new kinds of regulatory regimes which have redefined the principles of taxation (such as earmarked taxes), property rights and obligations. Throughout Europe, for example, producers of packaging are having to pay for the environmental costs of packaging waste. Makers of cars, tyres, electrical and electronic goods are shortly to follow suit. This amounts to the privatisation of social costs, a radical change in the concept of property.

Against the tide of deregulation, govern-

ments are realising that if they can be first in the field with new regulations, it can give them an edge in international competition. Tariffs and quotas may have been ruled out in the neoliberal world. But environmental regulations provide a new form of protection. They prompt innovations in material and process technologies, which can then be exported once other countries are forced to adopt similar levels of regulation. Germany has been a pioneer in recycling and pollution regulations, now being imposed throughout the EU and, as a result, German firms lead the field in electronic recycling, composting, and eco materials technology.

And in Britain? We are the laggards in Europe. The rate of municipal recycling is 8 per cent. The UK recycles only 40 per cent of its paper, as against 71 per cent in Germany; 30 per cent of its bottles as against 89 per cent in Switzerland; and 16 per cent of its steel cans against 80 per cent in Germany. Throughout the 1990s, successive UK governments have followed rather than led in regulatory change, and as a result the technological edge in the recycling revolution lies elsewhere.

For the time being, it looks as though we will remain at the bottom of the European recycling league table, responding to the challenge of reducing landfills by building incinerators rather than paper factories. The new White Paper on Waste which came out on 30 June raised the target for municipal recycling to 30 per cent by 2010, but it is

unrealistic because local authorities, like the small- and medium-firm sector, lack the funds to finance the transition.

It is not that the money is not there. There is a Landfill Tax which currently raises some £460 million per annum, rising to £685 million by 2005. Most of this is earmarked to reduce employers' national insurance contributions. But 20 per cent of it (£92 million this year) is earmarked for environmental causes. This would go a long way to bringing UK recycling up to continental levels. But because the Treasury is hostile to earmarking, the previous government arrangement was for the distribution of this 20 per cent to be made by the landfill companies as an offset to their tax payments (see Money to Burn, right).

Not surprisingly, because waste disposal is more profitable than recycling, the landfill companies have tended to use these offsets as free PR (including the promotion of incineration) and have starved waste-minimisation projects, while the regulations themselves preclude local authority-led initiatives and the finance of mainstream recycling.

DUE TO POLICIES OF THE PREVIOUS government, local councils are substantially worse off. They are having to pay £270 million extra a year in landfill tax, without receiving any funds back for recycling.

If Britain moved to Californian levels of recycling, it would create 50,000 net new jobs, save three to five times as much electricity as incinerators could produce, cut CO₂ emissions by the equivalent of more than five million cars and take a major step towards removing the toxic hazards of modern waste disposal. Yet the

new White Paper suggests that 40 to 130 new incinerators are likely to be needed – a programme that would be deeply unpopular, require massive amounts of public money (over £50 billion in long-term municipal disposal contracts), and sacrifice the environmental and economic benefits of intensive recycling. It is the grey road rather than the green.

The problem is that the old organisations of the waste industry – landfill companies, waste managers, government officials – find it difficult to adapt to a new system which, like many of the new green industries, needs fine fingers to succeed. Incinerators may be more expensive but they are easier for centralised organisations to plan, finance and control. So although everyone acknowledges the benefits of recycling, successive UK governments have tilted the playing field, through taxes and subsidies, towards incineration.

To correct this does not require new laws but a revision of regulations and a clear lead on the directions of change. There is a need for some joined up government, and new 'developmental' instruments – a 'Zero Waste Fund' to provide the transition finance, and a Zero Waste Agency to take the lead in promoting the change. These would provide the means for local and national coalitions to be formed, linking innovative firms, the best local authorities and community recyclers, with the capacity to realise the potential of the emerging eco-economy of waste. ■ Robin Murray is Visiting Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics. His book *Creating Wealth from Waste* was published in July by Demos. Available from Ecologica, 88 Albion Drive, London E8 4LY, £11.95.



MONEY TO BURN

The present government inherited the last government's Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and left it intact, writes Arthur Neslen. Under the scheme, landfill operators can contribute 20 per cent of their annual landfill tax liability to environmental bodies approved by the state regulator, Entrust, and claim 90 per cent of it back.

In theory, the taxpayer subsidises operators to fund research into worthy environmental causes. In practice, much of the subsidy has been used to advance the PR interests of the landfill companies and the waste disposal they favour. This is how one such body, the Environmental Services Agency Research Trust (Esart) works.

According to its 'Summary of Research Scoping Study', Esart currently has £3.5 million in research funds and a mission to 'work on behalf of its members to develop markets...' Such work includes spending £25,000 'to analyse why the public often takes a negative view of landfill sites and to consider the preparation of a response to the Friends of the Earth publication on how to object to landfill planning applications.'

The Trust's board members include: Berian Griffiths of Biffa Waste Services, one of the largest landfill operators with an annual turnover of £248 million, and James Meredith of Shanks and McEwan plc, who last year provoked the Greengains community into a four-day site occupation when they broke an EC directive by dumping 120 tonnes of PCBs in the Lanarkshire village.

Esart is spending £10,000-£30,000 on developing an information strategy and press newsletter. £30,000-£50,000 is going on 'encouraging' representatives of the UK waste industry to attend EU committee meetings, and £50,000-£75,000 on research into whether incinerators or landfill are more sustainable – all from the public purse.

The big money, however, up to £1.4 million, is going on research into landfill 'containment systems', the equivalent of enormous bin liners to bury landfill waste in. No environmentalist believes this will work. The question is whether it will convince Brussels that the bags stop landfill pollution and allow companies to sidestep the European landfill directive.

The Energy from Waste Foundation (EfW) is another environmental body funded through the landfill rebate. It was launched in June 1997. Unlike Esart, its public accounts do not say where its money goes. Clearly, within five months of being set up, it had received £364,000 from landfill operators to fund research into such novel subjects as 'Energy efficiency: landfill gas vs energy from waste'.

Mike Childs of Friends of the Earth notes: 'EfW tried to discredit recycling by commissioning research in Canada but there was a paucity of facts in their work and no referencing.' He and many others were hoping that the government would make their claimed commitment to recycling a reality by bringing the landfill rebate back into the public purse and use it to make the waste industry a means of conservation and regeneration, through support for recycling and the jobs it creates. Until resources are stumped up to implement recycling programmes, and the environment is given precedence over PR for polluters, talk of a greener Britain will remain just so much hot air.

ACTION ON RECYCLING



A round-up of good ways to deal with waste by Sarah Efron

Community Recycling Network

CRN is the largest provider of household kerbside collections in Britain and serves as an umbrella group for 180 local waste management projects across the country. CRN manages recycling schemes at airports and events like the Glastonbury Festival, Wimbledon and the Dunhill Cup. Member groups of CRN organise exchanges of furniture, appliances and computers and makes recycling available to over four million households in Britain.

Tel: 0117942 0142. Email: crnmail@cmhq.demon.co.uk. Website: www.cmhq.demon.co.uk

Wyecycle, Kent

This group recycles and composts 70 per cent of household waste in two villages in Kent: it initiated a monthly Saturday Swap Day, where residents exchange their unwanted, reusable items in the village hall. The group also operates a weekly refilling service of cleaning products. Wyecycle recently launched a farmers' market and a delivery service for local organic produce.

Tel: 01233 813 298

Emerge

Emerge operates a pilot residential and commercial kerbside recycling programme in Manchester. The group also holds workshops for children, using art to teach about waste and recycling. Tel: 0161 232 8014, email: emerge@redbricks.org.uk

Centre for Alternative Technology, Wales

This ecological display centre demonstrates creative ways of sustainable living. The seven-acre site uses wind, water and solar power, organic agriculture and has an alternative sewage system. The centre is a family holiday destination, offers educational visits and produces 80 publications on sustainable living. Tel: 01654 702400. Website: www.cat.org.uk

OTHER CAMPAIGNS

AIM KLEAN – Against Incineration in Maidstone Kent Local Environment Action Now

Tel: 01622 765 606. Email: brian@bshandley.freereserve.co.uk. Website: www.btinternet.com/~allington.clean/cloud.htm

Waste Watch National Wasteline

Tel: 0870 243 0136 Website: www.wastewatch.org.uk



Waste, rather than forests, is the new raw material of the paper industry