

BEDFORDSHIRE CLIMATE CHANGE FORUM

Energy from Waste

Public Meeting at Stewartby on 17 March 2008

Mary Edwards is Friends of the Earth Regional Campaigns Co-ordinator for the East of England. In her presentation, entitled “Incineration and Climate Change; Strange Bedfellows” she saw two main problems; that we produce too much waste and pollution, especially CO₂ and methane, much of the latter from organic matter in landfill. She drew our attention to the EU Landfill Directive, the overall aim of which is

“to prevent or reduce as far as possible negative effects on the environment, in particular the pollution of surface water, groundwater, soil and air, and on the global environment, **including the greenhouse effect**, as well as any resulting risk to human health, from the landfilling of waste, during the whole lifecycle of the landfill”.

and reminded us of the national targets for re-use, recycling and composting of household waste – 40% by 2010, 45% by 2015 and 50% by 2020. To achieve these we must work through the waste hierarchy of prevention, re-use, recycling/composting, energy recovery and finally, disposal to landfill.

Friends of the Earth is opposed to incineration because it

- Wastes natural resources

Aluminium can no longer be recycled, plastics cannot be reprocessed and compostable materials cannot be returned to the land

- Crowds out recycling

There is no longer an incentive to increase recycling. Hampshire, with 3 new incinerators since 2003 is not meeting its recycling targets. This is largely because the expensive incinerators must be continually fed with as much waste as possible, severely reducing flexibility. Recycling saves 3x the energy in paper, 5x that in plastic and 6x that of textiles.

- Worsens climate change

All forms of waste disposal do this, from methane in landfill to inefficient burning of fossil fuel based, non-renewable plastics, plus CO₂ from waste transportation.

- Pollutes

A May 2004 Defra report concluded that incineration as a system of waste disposal resulted in the highest emissions of CO₂, nitrous oxides, particulate matter, arsenic, hydrogen chloride dioxins and furans. Dioxins may be associated with cancer, hormonal problems, reduced immune system capacity and sperm counts and may affect foetal development. Asthma, chronic bronchitis and heart disease are exacerbated by dust particles. Cadmium may cause lung and kidney disease and mercury can affect the nervous system. Acid gases affect lungs adversely.

- Costs through subsidies, taxes and penalties

The Climate Levy and other energy policies provide subsidies and tax breaks for incineration but not for CO2 emission reducing recycling. It is possible that councils not delivering enough waste to feed an incinerator will face financial penalties.

- Takes time to build

Incinerators can cost over £100million and require long term contracts of 25-30 years.

Why, therefore, are Councils like Bedfordshire choosing incineration when there are so many problems with it?

Is it because of:

- EU Landfill Directive targets diverting waste from landfill -2010, 2013,2020?
- Rising costs of Landfill Tax?
- Recovery targets in the Waste Strategy 2007?
- The Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme with its biodegradable fraction?

FoE believes that there is a better way. Waste prevention must be followed by recycling, composting and anaerobic digestion, such as Biogen in Bedfordshire, which creates electricity, heat and fertiliser from agricultural and food chain waste.. Residual waste can then be treated by mechanical/biological methods to remove further recyclables and reduce methane production, before being landfilled. This must be facilitated by a suitable economic framework, including taxes on virgin materials to reflect their true costs, reducing taxes on recycled materials and removing the subsidies for incineration.