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Clean Energy, Sustainability and Public Health Advocates Say: Don't Trash Renewable Energy in Maryland!

Nonprofits Slam Bills That Give Even Larger Subsidies to Waste Incineration Under Maryland's Renewable Portfolio Standard

An alliance of local, state and national groups that advocate for clean energy, sustainable resource management and public health is calling on Maryland state legislators to reject legislation that would elevate waste incineration from Tier 2 to Tier 1 status under Maryland's Renewable Portfolio Standard.

The alliance points out that by elevating incineration to Tier 1, Maryland House Bill 1121 and Senate Bill 690 would degrade the Standard by swamping it with incineration, crowd out legitimate renewable energy, and undermine less expensive, more sustainable approaches to generating energy, creating jobs and reducing demand for landfill disposal. It would also undermine Maryland's efforts to attain two of the Renewable Portfolio Standards two main goals – reducing overall energy consumption and fighting global warming.

“Maryland should meet its renewable energy by promoting legitimate clean and renewable energy such as solar, wind and geothermal,” said Brad Heavner, Executive Director of Environment Maryland. “Promoting waste incineration to Tier 1 is like giving yourself a test then cheating on it to make yourself look good.”

Elevating waste incineration to Tier 1 would provide additional lucrative financial incentives to an industry that already receives incentives and enormous subsidies and has a questionable financial and environmental record across the United States. Garbage incineration and other types of mass-burn incinerators are exorbitantly expensive, generate air pollution and potentially toxic ash, and consume enormous quantities of materials that could otherwise be recycled or composted into useful products.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that megawatt for megawatt, incineration generates more carbon dioxide emissions than even coal – the dirtiest fossil fuel. And according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, waste incineration is the most expensive way to generate electricity.

“Calling incinerators 'waste-to-energy' is a marketing ploy by the incinerator industry to peddle their wares,” said Brenda Platt, a national expert on waste reduction and Co-director of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. “Preventing waste saves energy. Reuse saves energy. Recycling saves energy. Incineration wastes energy, material resources and money. Recycling a ton of materials generally saves far more energy than burning it generates.

“Incineration is also the most expensive solid waste strategy. It's generally far more expensive than waste prevention, recycling, and composting; it often relies on huge, risky public debts; and it does a poor job of creating local jobs and revenues.”

Platt noted that the proposed Frederick County garbage incinerator, which would cost about \$500 million to build and is designed to burn up to 1500 tons of garbage per day, is roughly 25 times more expensive than a similarly sized recycling facility in Elk Ridge, MD. That incinerator would be financed with public debt, and appears already to be crowding out a legitimate Tier 1 renewable energy generator – an anaerobic digestion facility that would process food waste and support greenhouse agriculture in Frederick County – because both would compete for some of the same materials.

Enacted in 2004, Maryland’s RPS requires electricity suppliers to ensure that renewable energy makes up at least 20 percent of the electricity that they sell to Maryland customers by the year 2022. The RPS requires a gradual increase between 2006 and 2022. Electricity suppliers may accumulate required Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) either by generating renewable energy or by buying RECs from other organizations that do generate renewable energy. Suppliers who fall short must pay into Maryland’s Strategic Energy Investment Fund.

Maryland’s RPS splits technologies into two tiers. Tier 1 includes solar energy, wind energy, geothermal energy, tidal and wave energy, anaerobic digestion, hydroelectric power, and other energy-producing technologies that are renewable and relatively clean. Tier 2 currently includes garbage incineration and certain types of hydroelectric power. Clean energy advocates opposed including waste incineration in the RPS in 2004, but the General Assembly and the Ehrlich administration tossed it in at the insistence of industry lobbyists and jurisdictions that had garbage incinerators.

Energy generators using technologies listed in the RPS can profit by selling RECs, often to electricity providers who do not generate enough renewable energy to comply with the RPS. Tier 1 RECs are given more renewable energy value under the scheme and fetch higher prices on the market. That profit motive and a desire to inflate Maryland’s renewable energy score are driving HB 1121 and SB 690, not sound energy and solid waste policy, say opponents to the bills.

The clean energy and sustainability advocates questioned industry claims that incineration is clean and is the best way to reduce demand for landfills.

“Incineration in the U.S. has, at best, a badly blemished environmental record, and even so-called modern incinerators have been shut down in recent years because they were not controlling emissions of highly toxic and carcinogenic air pollutants, including dioxin,” said Andy Galli, Director of Maryland Advocacy for Clean Water Action. “We could recycle or compost roughly 90 percent of what we now burn or bury, and we could create a lot of local jobs and revenues in the process.”

“Beyond that, a significant percentage of solid waste cannot be incinerated and goes straight to the landfill, and after incineration you have to landfill huge quantities of ash that are contaminated with toxic chemicals. Waste prevention, recycling and composting can reduce landfill demand just as well, at much lower costs and with much lower risks. This rush to burn and to provide even bigger subsidies for dirty, nonrenewable energy makes no sense.”

“Corporate special interests have completely distorted the vital policy debate around clean, renewable energy,” said David O’Leary, Conservation Chair of the Sierra Club’s Maryland Chapter. “It’s just bizarre that while the legislature is balking at supporting a legitimate renewable energy like offshore wind, it’s seriously considering providing huge financial incentives for a destructive, expensive technology like incineration.

“Clean is clean. Renewable is renewable. Incineration is neither.”