

# INCINERATOR myths

Incinerator proponents buy into a number of myths when trying to sell projects. Here are some common myths surrounding municipal solid waste incineration:

**Myth: Incinerators provide a solution to the problem of rapidly increasing waste.**

**Reality:** Incinerators do not make municipal solid waste magically disappear. Indeed, they encourage waste generation and current patterns of production and consumption, which are at the root of solid waste problems. Incinerators are the most costly of all solid waste management options, result in air and water pollution, and still need to be supplemented by landfills as they produce an ash that is far more toxic than ordinary domestic trash.

**Myth: Incinerators maximize the use of scarce landfill space.**

**Reality:** Communities with incinerators still need landfills for ash disposal and by-pass wastes. Ash can comprise about 25% by weight of an incinerator's throughput and must be landfilled. Thus, incineration means incineration plus landfill. There are two kinds of by-pass waste: bulky materials that do not fit into the incinerator (such as mattresses), and collected waste that cannot be burned when the incinerator is down for regularly scheduled or unscheduled maintenance. These materials typically require landfilling in communities that have built incinerators. On the other hand, embracing zero waste as a planning tool and a vision for the future will extend landfill life and help build a sustainable system to avoid waste and recover materials.

**Myth: Incineration is less expensive than other options, including recycling and “sanitary” landfills and incineration yields electricity, a useful by-product.**

**Reality:** Incineration is the most costly of all waste management options. Costs cannot be offset with energy revenues. Consider Rhode Island's (U.S.) 1992 law that banned municipal solid waste incineration in the state: "...incineration of solid waste is the most costly method of waste disposal with known and unknown escalating costs which would place substantial and unreasonable burdens on both state and municipal budgets to the point of jeopardizing the public's interest." In general, incineration costs 5 to 10 times more per ton than sanitary landfills, even after discounting energy revenues. If incineration is cost-competitive with landfilling, recycling, or other options, residents of the global South should be concerned that such "cheap" incinerators do not have the pollution control equipment that their counterparts in countries with more stringent regulations might have. With regard to energy, considerably more energy can be saved through alternative strategies such as waste prevention, reuse, recycling, and composting than can be generated by burning. Three to five times more energy can be saved by recycling than by burning materials.

**Myth: Local communities prefer incinerators to landfills.**

**Reality:** Incinerators, like landfills, are highly unpopular among local communities. Knowledgeable community activists the world over have fought to prevent construction of incinerators. Hundreds of projects have been cancelled or put on hold as a result of citizen opposition. In the U.S., Philadelphia, Seattle, Portland, Austin, San Diego, Boston and other cities have cancelled proposed municipal waste incinerators. In the Netherlands, citizens organized to defeat a US\$700-million incinerator proposed for a suburb of The Hague, then organized a national network against all proposed and operating incinerators in the country. In Germany, some 500 grassroots groups oppose incineration. As public opposition to the construction of new incinerators in the west continues to grow, western incineration industries are pushing their unwanted technology east.

**Myth: Incinerators are safe and more environmentally benign than landfills.**

**Reality:** Incinerators increase risk of environmental and health threats as compared to other waste management alternatives. In addition to the threat to groundwater from ash disposal, incineration creates large amounts of air pollution. Incinerators are major – and in many areas the largest – sources of pollutants such as dioxin, lead, and other heavy metals released into the environment. They also release carbon monoxide, oxides of sulfur and nitrogen, hydrocarbons, and particulates into the air.

Source: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Washington, D.C., U.S., 2004.