Stop Trashing The Climate

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

June 2008

A ZERO WASTE APPROACH IS ONE OF THE FASTEST, CHEAPEST, AND MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO PROTECT THE CLIMATE.

Significantly decreasing waste disposed in landfills and incinerators will reduce greenhouse gas emissions the equivalent to closing 21% of U.S. coal-fired power plants. This is comparable to leading climate protection proposals such as improving national vehicle fuel efficiency. Indeed, preventing waste and expanding reuse, recycling, and composting are essential to put us on the path to climate stability.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. A zero waste approach is one of the fastest, cheapest, and most effective strategies we can use to protect the climate and the environment. Significantly decreasing waste disposed in landfills and incinerators will reduce greenhouse gases the equivalent to closing one-fifth of U.S. coal-fired power plants. This is comparable to leading climate protection proposals such as improving vehicle fuel efficiency. Indeed, implementing waste reduction and materials recovery strategies nationally are essential to put us on the path to stabilizing the climate by 2050.

2. Wasting directly impacts climate change because it is directly linked to global resource extraction, transportation, processing, and manufacturing. When we minimize waste, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions in sectors that together represent 36.7% of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

3. A zero waste approach is essential. Through the Urban Environmental Accords, 103 city mayors worldwide have committed to sending zero waste to landfills and incinerators by the year 2040 or earlier.

4. Existing waste incinerators should be retired, and no new incinerators or landfills should be constructed.

5. Landfills are the largest source of anthropogenic methane emissions in the U.S., and the impact of landfill emissions in the short term is grossly underestimated — methane is 72 times more potent than CO_2 over a 20-year time frame.

6. The practice of landfilling and incinerating biodegradable materials such as food scraps, paper products, and yard trimmings should be phased out immediately. Composting these materials is critical to protecting our climate and restoring our soils.

7. Incinerators emit more CO_2 per megawatt-hour than coal-fired, natural-gas-fired, or oil-fired power plants. Incinerating materials such as wood, paper, yard debris, and food discards is far from "climate neutral"; rather, incinerating these and other materials is detrimental to the climate.

8. Incinerators, landfill gas capture systems, and landfill "bioreactors" should not be subsidized under state and federal renewable energy and green power incentive programs or carbon trading schemes. In addition, subsidies to extractive industries such as mining, logging, and drilling should be eliminated.

9. New policies are needed to fund and expand climate change mitigation strategies such as waste reduction, reuse, recycling, composting, and extended producer responsibility. Policy incentives are also needed to create locally-based materials recovery jobs and industries.

10. Improved tools are needed for assessing the true climate implications of the wasting sector.

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A Call To Action — 12 Priority Policies Needed Now

In order for a zero waste strategy to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the following priority policies are needed:

1. **Establish and implement national, statewide, and municipal zero waste targets and plans:** Any zero waste target or plan must be accompanied by a shift in funding from supporting waste disposal to supporting zero waste jobs, infrastructure, and local strategies.

2. **Retire existing incinerators and halt construction of new incinerators and landfills:** The use of incinerators and investments in new disposal facilities — including mass-burn, pyrolysis, plasma, gasification, other incineration technologies, and landfill "bioreactors" — obstruct efforts to reduce waste and increase materials recovery. Eliminating investments in incineration and landfilling is an important step to free up taxpayer money for resource conservation, efficiency, and renewable energy solutions.

3. **Levy a per-ton surcharge on landfilled and incinerated materials:** Many European nations have adopted significant landfilling fees of $20 to $40 per ton that are used to fund recycling programs and decrease greenhouse gases. Surcharges on both landfills and incinerators are an important counterbalance to the negative environmental and human health costs of disposal that are borne by the public.

4. **Stop organic materials from being sent to landfills and incinerators:** Implement local, state, and national incentives, penalties, or bans to prevent organic materials, particularly food discards and yard trimmings, from ending up in landfills and incinerators.

5. **End state and federal "renewable energy" subsidies to landfills and incinerators:** Incentives such as the Renewable Electricity Production Tax Credit and Renewable Portfolio Standards should only benefit truly renewable energy and resource conservation strategies such as energy efficiency, and the use of wind, solar, and ocean power. Resource conservation should be incentivized as a key strategy for reducing energy use. In addition, subsidies to extractive industries such as mining, logging, and drilling should be eliminated. Instead, subsidies should support industries that conserve and safely reuse materials.

6. **Provide policy incentives that create and sustain locally-based reuse, recycling, and composting jobs:** Incentives should be directed to revitalize local economies by supporting environmentally just, community-based, and green materials recovery jobs and businesses.

7. **Expand adoption of per-volume or per-weight fees for the collection of trash:** Pay-as-you-throw fees have been proven to increase recycling and reduce the amount of waste disposed.

8. **Make manufacturers and brand owners responsible for the products and packaging they produce:** Manufactured products and packaging represent 72.5% of all municipal solid waste. When manufacturers are responsible for recycling their products, they use less toxic materials, consume fewer materials, design their products to last longer, create better recycling systems, are motivated to minimize waste costs, and no longer pass the cost of disposal to the government and the taxpayer.

9. **Regulate single-use plastic products and packaging that have low or non-existent recycling levels:** In less than one generation, the use and disposal of single-use plastic packaging has grown from 120,000 tons in 1960 to 12,720,000 tons per year today. Policies such as bottle deposit laws, polystyrene food takeout packaging bans, and regulations targeting single-use water bottles and shopping bags have successfully been implemented in several jurisdictions around the world and should be replicated everywhere.

10. **Regulate paper packaging and junk mail and pass policies to significantly increase paper recycling:** Of the 170 million tons of municipal solid waste disposed each year in the U.S., 24.3% is paper and paperboard. Reducing and recycling paper will decrease releases of numerous air and water pollutants to the environment, and will also conserve energy and forest resources, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

11. **Decision-makers and environmental leaders should reject climate protection agreements and strategies that embrace landfill and incinerator disposal:** Rather than embrace agreements and blueprints that call for supporting waste incineration as a strategy to combat climate change, such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, decision-makers and environmental organizations should adopt climate blueprints that support zero waste. One example of an agreement that will move cities in the right direction for zero waste is the Urban Environmental Accords signed by 103 city mayors worldwide.

12. **Better assess the true climate implications of the wasting sector:** Measuring greenhouse gases over the 20-year time horizon, as published by the IPCC, is essential to reveal the impact of methane on the short-term climate tipping point. Also needed are updates to the U.S. EPA's WAste Reduction Model (WARM) as well as new models to accurately account for the impact of local activities on total global emissions and to compare lifecycle climate impact of different energy generation options.

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