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BREAKING TOP STORY

Report: Hudson Falls trash plant among country's 'dirty dozen' incinerators

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HUDSON FALLS — The Wheelabrator trash-burning plant in Hudson Falls is listed as one of the top polluting incinerators in the country for lead, mercury and carbon monoxide, according to a national report on waste incinerators released Tuesday.

It has not exceeded its permit requirements, nor has it had any recent violations, but some local and national organizations still worry what the cumulative impacts of its emissions are on the community.

Hudson Falls Wheelabrator

- Started operating in 1991
- Processes 500 tons of waste per day
- Produces enough electricity to power 14,540 homes
- Recovered 2,409 tons of metal in 2018

The report is called “U.S. Municipal Solid Waste Incinerators: An Industry in Decline,” and was researched and created by The New School’s Tishman Environment and Design Center in New York City. It was sponsored by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, with support from organizations that focus on impoverished communities and environmental justice, including the JPB Foundation and the Overbrook Foundation.

The report also found that about 79% of municipal solid waste incinerators are in low-income communities and communities of color.

Hudson Falls is considered in that bracket, with a poverty rate of about 20%, according to 2017 U.S. Census data.

The communities where these incinerators operate are burdened by other polluting industries, the study found, creating an unknown cumulative impact on the health of those who live in an approximately 3-mile radius.

It’s a familiar story to the Glens Falls region, which is home to Finch Paper, Ames Goldsmith, Lehigh Cement and others.

“This is a real concern for people’s health around those types of industrial areas,” said Denise Patel, the U.S. program director for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, in a phone interview. “The Wheelabrator facility in Hudson Falls was one of the top ones for emissions of lead. ... There’s no real safe level of exposure to lead, specifically for children. That’s a concern.”

The report lists Wheelabrator Hudson Falls as the top lead-emitting incinerator in the country, under a list called “the dirty dozen.”

Report's top emitters of lead

Of 73 municipal solid waste incinerators, the top 12 emitters of lead per ton of waste, according to 2014 emissions figures in the report, are:

1. Wheelabrator Hudson Falls, Hudson Falls, N.Y.

2. Polk County Solid Waste Resource Recovery Facility, Fosston, Minnesota
3. Bay County Waste-to-Energy, Panama City, Florida
4. Covanta Camden Energy Recovery Center, Camden, New Jersey
5. Essex County Resource Recovery, Newark, New Jersey
6. Wheelabrator Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland
7. Ecomaine Waste-to-Energy, Portland, Maine
8. Hampton-NASA Steam Plant, Hampton, Virginia
9. Susquehanna Resource Management Complex, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
10. Mid-Maine Waste Action Corporation, Auburn, Maine
11. Palm Beach Renewable Energy #1, West Palm Beach, Florida
12. Wheelabrator Falls, Morrisville, Pennsylvania

In a 2011 chart compiled by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, it was listed as the top lead emitter of all 10 trash incinerators in the state, and emitted levels higher than some coal-burning plants.

Michelle Nadeau, a spokeswoman for Wheelabrator Technologies, said in an emailed statement Wednesday that Wheelabrator completes “more than 520 compliance checks each day to ensure our facility meets the strict air-quality standards established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to safeguard public health and the environment.”

When asked about the report, and whether it had any concerns about the trash plant in Hudson Falls, the state Department of Environmental Conservation said in an emailed statement that it “requires all permitted facilities to adhere to strict conditions in order to protect public health and the environment.”

The department is continuing to review the report, but Wheelabrator has been operating within its permit. Wheelabrator was also not listed on the report’s list of top violators.

The state Department of Health did not offer a comment on the report on Wednesday.

Many incinerators are also getting older, Patel said, and becoming more costly to fix.

The Hudson Falls incinerator began operating in 1991. According to the report, the average life expectancy of incinerators in the U.S. is about 31 years.

The New School's report is not the first national group to take note of Wheelabrator.

The Energy Justice Network, led by attorney and environmental advocate Mike Ewall, has been studying the impacts of trash incinerators and is looking to close them all. Ewall spoke at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls earlier this month, hosted by a grassroots organization called the Clean Air Action Network.



National air-quality advocate speaks in Glens Falls against trash incineration

Ewall said Wednesday that he had concerns about The New School's report, especially how it mapped the incinerators. He thought there were some "glaring errors," especially in their locations and what that meant for the poverty rate and communities of color.

Overall, however, Ewall has been collecting and sharing similar emissions information to advocate for Wheelabrator's closure.

Most recently at the Glens Falls talk on May 6, he noted that Wheelabrator emits 67% of the area's hydrochloric acid, 40% of the area's lead and 41% of the area's mercury, also based on the EPA's 2014 emissions inventory data.

Tracy Frisch, founder of the Clean Air Action Network, said in an email Wednesday that she applauded the findings in The New School's report.

"Pragmatically, C.A.A.N. recognizes that we need to start planning a future without a trash incinerator," she wrote. "That's why starting this fall we will be working with other local, forward-thinking groups and individuals to develop a local Zero Waste plan. Following the lead of a growing number of other localities, we can drastically reduce the amount of waste that residents and businesses send for disposal, and create new jobs in the process."

That's what Ewall has been advocating for, as is the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives.

Both Ewall and Patel talked about reducing the use of plastics, composting food and organic waste, recycling and reusing items.

Ultimately, they'd like to see no emissions coming from these plants.

Nadeau said Wheelabrator and waste-to-energy technology "is globally recognized as a safe and environmentally responsible form of waste management and energy creation. ... Waste-to-energy reduces greenhouse gases by one ton for every ton of waste. Each year, our Hudson Falls facility diverts 159,000 tons of waste from landfills, separates 2,400 tons of metals for recycling and safely produces 14 (gross) megawatts of clean, renewable baseload energy — enough to power 14,500 homes, offsetting the need for roughly 193,000 barrels of oil or 58,000 tons of coal."

Hudson Falls Mayor John Barton and Deputy Mayor Bob Cook did not respond Wednesday to an email request for comment about the report. In a past story, Cook had called Wheelabrator Technologies "good stewards of the property."

He added that they are taxpayers and generate good-paying jobs. Barton had said in the past that he had confidence in the state and federal regulatory agencies that monitor Wheelabrator.

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF. At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

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More online

To read the full incinerator report, past coverage about this issue and more, check out this story on [poststar.com](https://www.poststar.com).

MORE INFORMATION



National air quality advocate to speak at Crandall Public Library

- National group looks to close all incinerators, including Hudson Falls' Wheelabrator
- Local group wants Coeymans' new air law to be a model for the region
- Glens Falls region air-quality organization forms
- Concerned over air quality, citizens press expert for answers
- How's the air in Glens Falls? It's hard to say
- Officials question cement plant's study results of burning paper-plastic mixture
- South Glens Falls appalled by cement plant test results
- Some officials ask DEC to extend public comment period on cement company's air permit
- South Glens Falls objects to Lehigh burning plastic
- Glens Falls cement company looks to update air permit

