

What Garbage Crisis?

Charles W. Baird

The environment is important to Americans, but so are such values as common sense, individual freedom, property rights, and economic well-being. Realizing that much environmental hectoring consists of gross exaggerations, and that warnings put forth by environmental activists sometimes contradict scientific principles as well as readily available evidence, the public has become more cautious in evaluating claims made by the environmental establishment.

The late syndicated columnist Warren Brookes told a Pacific Research Institute forum that backers of California's "Big Green" initiative overstated the risks of pesticides on fruits and vegetables by a multiple as high as 21,000. If Big Green had won, then the extreme pesticide standards that would have applied to produce grown or sold in California would have driven prices paid by the state's households dramatically higher. Shall we discourage Californians from eating foods that, physicians agree, reduce the incidence of cancer in the digestive system?

Environmental extremism has become the principal means by which collectivists with influence in the environmental movement hope to achieve their dream of a thoroughly regulated and planned economy. The Red Star has burned out, but the Green Star is rising.

A Quasi-Religion

Consider, for example, the alleged garbage crisis. Congress is debating whether, and in what form, to reauthorize the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the principal federal waste disposal law. Because of Green lobbying efforts, it appears that the Act will be reauthorized and substantially strengthened. One provision proposed would be to make recycling, regardless of whether it is cost efficient, mandatory throughout the country.

trines of this religion is the recycling of municipal solid waste. Landfill sites, the litany goes, are scarce, and in many cases they are hazardous. Incineration, the litany proceeds, is unthinkable because of the dangerous content of the resulting ash and other air pollutants. There are, the litany continues, only two legitimate acts of contrition: consuming less and recycling. The litany ends with, "Go in peace, and abstain from plastics. Thanks be to Mother Earth."

To overcome the NIMBY attitude held toward landfills, private operators would have to offer compensation to nearby land owners. Thus, areas containing developed residential and commercial sites would be avoided.

Environmentalists' propagandistic groundwork has included televised film footage of garbage-laden barges in search of dumping places, which led viewers to fear that Americans will drown in municipal solid refuse unless we reduce our consumption and take the recycling pledge. Many environmentalists follow a new (albeit with ancient roots) "earth womb" religion, and they see consumption as not only profligate but, indeed, sinful. One of the most important doc-

The Benefits of Landfilling

The truth is that we face no shortage of geologically safe potential landfill sites. Land-poor Japan has 2,400 operational sites, while in our land-rich country there are only 4,800. Half of our existing landfills are due to close in five years, but landfills are designed to stay open, on average, for only ten years. Landfill sites can be environmentally safe and people-friendly. Vast, empty regions in

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the West and the Southwest could be developed into safe landfills. Moreover, closed landfills do not have to be dead land; housing developments, golf courses, and conference centers are but three types of post-closure landfill uses that already have succeeded. Only politics and environmentalists' religious zeal stand in the way of common sense policies.

Of course, landfills will provide solutions only if technology is coupled with economics. The focus of the economic policy should be the private ownership of landfill sites. Private owners would have strong incentives to use liners, to install systems that collect leachate and methane, and to monitor ground water quality. It is only on government-owned landfills that scant attention is paid to such activities. The reason is simple: unlike the government, private owners face the economic consequences of damages they create.

Similarly, it is in the interests of private owners to charge fees that reflect all costs of collection and disposal, including landfill closure and post-closure maintenance costs. Individuals and businesses can make rational waste disposal choices only if disposal fees embody the true costs of the activity. Such fees should differ for different types of waste, but politically-set municipal disposal fees are usually uniform for all varieties of waste, and they typically cover only current operating expenses. This pricing system encourages over-dumping and a lack of attention to the composition of what is dumped.

The way to overcome the alleged shortage of landfill sites is to get politics out of the way; even existing landfill sites should be privatized. The proper role of government in this matter is judicial. If courts held private landfill operators

strictly liable for harms imposed on others, then operators would internalize these costs and make appropriate operating and pricing decisions. They would foster careful disposal practices by charging dumping fees reflecting weight or volume, and would promote efficient recycling by charging based on the composition of items discarded. To overcome the NIMBY ("not in my backyard") attitude held toward landfill sitings, operators would have to offer compensation to owners of land in close proximity. Thus, areas containing developed residential and commercial sites would be avoided.

Incineration as a Viable Alternative

Technology also makes it possible for us to incinerate wastes in ways that do not harm the environment. We burn only 14% of our municipal solid wastes, and even the 20% EPA target for 1992 is dwarfed by the 60% safely incinerated in Japan. Pollution from incineration is no longer a problem. Much of the ash can be put to good use, for example in secondary road construction, and the rest can be safely landfilled, though it is ironic that if we were to incinerate at the same rate as the Japanese, our need for landfill space would be cut by almost half. Only the irrational opposition of environmental zealots and the NIMBY phenomenon prevent us from creating sufficient incinerator facilities. Yet just as with landfill siting, NIMBY could be overcome with compensation, which would be minimized by the prudent choice of sites.

It is puzzling that many who fear a shortage of landfill sites argue strongly against incineration. About 40% of landfill waste is paper; there is already more newspaper waiting to be recycled than demand for recycled paper can absorb,

and toxic bleaches used in recycling present their own environmental problems. Paper is a renewable resource; if we burned paper now sent to landfills, we would ameliorate two problems at once, and the resulting energy could be converted to electricity, reducing our consumption of fossil fuels.

The state of Maine has moved to prohibit private ownership of new incinerators; rational public policy dictates just the opposite. If government monitors compliance to assure that private owners are held liable for damages they cause, then we will have safe and effective incineration. Public agencies that operate incinerators take less care; private owners have their own wealth at stake, while government employees do not.

Conclusion

We should forsake the environmental priesthood and adopt an integrated approach to municipal solid waste management. Such an approach would include sensible landfilling and incineration, along with recycling and packaging decisions based on cost-benefit comparisons. If we follow that strategy, then the "garbage crisis" of the 1990s will be seen to be as chimerical as the "energy crisis" of the 1970s, which was also caused by faulty government policy. The cure is simple: eliminate government intervention, privatize to set prices correctly, and allow individuals, guided by those prices, to make their own choices. ■

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