

Is burying best? [Part 2 of a series]



More than a quarter of the garbage from Metro Vancouver ends up at the Cache Creek regional landfill.

Arnaldo Rodriguez

By [Jeff Nagel - BC Local News](#)

Published: **May 07, 2010 9:00 AM**

Updated: **May 07, 2010 9:33 AM**

The arid sagebrush hills of the Fraser Canyon country have long been a dumping ground for Metro Vancouver's garbage.

Since 1989, a fleet of diesel trucks has hauled growing loads of Metro's waste 325 kilometres east to the Cache Creek regional landfill.

The dry climate means less rain flows through the garbage and less toxic leachate forms – a key advantage over the Vancouver Landfill in Delta.

And the locals, for the most part, don't complain – 120 waste-handling jobs there buoy the local economy.

"The mood has always been very supportive," says Cache Creek Mayor John Ranta. "We'd like to enhance the community stability by keeping those jobs."

His village is a partner in the plan to create a large new landfill, next to the existing nearly full dump, that could continue taking Lower Mainland garbage for up to 25 more years.

Metro officials once pursued the same strategy. They first tried to expand the Cache Creek landfill in the 1990s to make room for future waste. But aboriginal opponents, armed with new legal precedents, prompted the region to drop that site and in 2000 buy a ranch near Ashcroft to transform into the next regional landfill.

The cowboys and cattle are still there – the ranch keeps running on Metro taxpayer subsidies. But no garbage ever arrived.

The province refused to approve the project after First



Nations threatened legal action.

In January of 2008, after spending \$10 million and a decade pursuing a new Interior landfill, Metro abandoned the idea and turned its sights to a waste-to-energy incinerator to burn the nearly 500,000 tonnes of garbage per year now going to Cache Creek.

Since then, Ranta and landfill operator Belcorp Environmental Services have done what Metro could not – clear a provincial environmental assessment and get a green light to build the new dump.

They are still not clear of aboriginal entanglements, however.

Chief Bob Pasco of the Nlaka'pamux Nation Tribal Council has three different court actions targeting the Cache Creek landfill expansion.

The landfill proponents and environment minister Barry Penner all but dismiss Pasco – his home reserve is further away, closer to Ashcroft, and the two closest bands have backed the new landfill in exchange for jobs and cash.

Research commissioned by the tribal council also flagged possible toxins coming from the landfill, but the province and Metro refuted those findings after conducting their own study.

Costs a central issue

The bigger fight is with Metro Vancouver and its claims that a new in-region incinerator would be vastly cheaper for taxpayers, thanks to the revenue generated from selling electricity and heat.

Metro pegs the difference at \$1.5 billion over 35 years, based on what it expects to pay to use the new Cache Creek landfill compared to its forecast that a new waste-to-energy plant would break even over the same period, even after paying off Metro's \$470-million capital investment.

"That does not seem to pass the straight-face test for me," says Jeffrey Morris, an Olympia, Wash.-based environmental economist.

He's one of the critics who suspects Metro's calculations are too generous for the waste-to-energy scenario and too pessimistic on landfill costs.

The incineration estimates depend on getting more revenue per tonne of garbage than the current waste-to-energy facility in Burnaby by locating the new plant amid a cluster of buildings or industries where there's more district heating potential.

A publicly owned incinerator would have two big advantages over private competitors – no money is diverted to private profits and Metro can access much cheaper public sector borrowing.

Rising fuel prices in the decades ahead are a major driver of the equation, according to Metro officials.

While the costs of the incinerator would be fixed – and paid off in 15 years – the revenues it would generate



Is landfilling a waste of valuable resources or does it provide an acceptable way to dispose of garbage while Metro Vancouver strives to increase recycling?

This second installment in a Black Press series on waste management looks at the Cache Creek landfill and its long-term potential.

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would increase over time with rising energy prices.

Conversely, the fuel to truck waste to Cache Creek and operate the required machinery there will become ever more expensive as energy prices rise, Metro maintains.

A KPMG analysis found Metro's estimated capital cost of a new incinerator is low compared to plants built elsewhere, particularly considering it promises state-of-the-art pollution controls.

The firm also concluded the cost of the landfill and hauling waste to it might total \$1.2 billion over 35 years, 20 per cent less than Metro's estimate.

Belcorp Environmental president Ted Rattray puts the costs of landfilling at Cache Creek even lower, at \$750 million over the 35 years.

"They simply haven't been able to substantiate their numbers," he said.

One knock against waste-to-energy plants is the high up-front cost of building them means there's pressure to feed them as much as possible, rather than reduce garbage or recycle more.

Jordan Best, a policy analyst with the Recycling Council of B.C., says the same situation can apply to landfills, which often insist on the same "put or pay" contracts.

Metro, for example, was for years required to deliver at least 200,000 tonnes of waste to Cache Creek annually.

But Rattray has a ready answer, pledging he wouldn't insist on minimum waste flows from Metro.

"We're not looking for long-term put-or-pay from anybody," he said.

It's the sort of promise that raises skeptical eyebrows at Metro headquarters, where officials say no such offer has been made.

Rattray also maintains the landfill expansion will proceed even if Metro doesn't sign on at all, because it's likely to take waste from the Fraser Valley and Thompson Nicola regional districts and possibly Vancouver Island. (Ranta, however, views Metro's waste as "integral" to the expansion plan.)

A bridge to zero waste

Rattray said Belcorp can simply build the new landfill a small section at a time, based on demand, with little outlay.

"The landfill option provides you with that flexibility, it doesn't demand a long-term commitment on supplying waste for the operation to be viable," Rattray said.

That makes the landfill an ideal interim solution, he argues, as Metro pursues its primary waste management goal of increasing the recycling rate to 70 per cent and beyond.

"The Cache Creek landfill is a bridge to



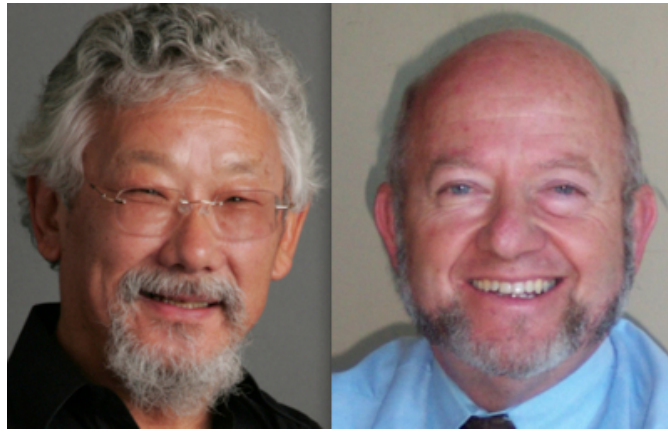
Aerial view of the Cache Creek regional landfill.

Arnaldo Rodriguez

"The Cache Creek landfill is a bridge to the zero waste goal," he said.

Technically, the landfill promises a double composite liner that uses layers of both clay and plastic to contain leachate, which would also be regularly pumped from the bottom to the top, where it can evaporate.

The landfill will be required to capture 75 per cent of landfill gas, methane that forms from the rotting garbage, and which may decline in the years ahead as local cities collect more organics to turn into compost or biofuel.



Environmentalist David Suzuki and Belcorp Environmental president Ted Rattray

File

Belcorp aims to convert the landfill gas into a liquid natural gas to power its own trucks and possibly other big rigs that could stop there to refuel. Other options under consideration include providing the gas to Terasen's natural gas grid or burning it as electricity.

For some, the debate boils down to philosophy.

"People should have to deal with the garbage in their own backyards," David Suzuki, Vancouver's most famous environmentalist, told Black Press last month.

"It is absolutely crazy for Ontario to ship their garbage to Michigan or for Vancouver to ship its garbage up to Cache Creek. This is absolutely unacceptable. It's crazy. We've got to deal with it right here where we generate it."

Suzuki said waste-to-energy incineration could be acceptable with the right scrubbing technology – he envisions "chemical sieves that you can blow the effluent through" to bond to and remove complex molecules like dioxins.

But he said the best strategy is to reduce garbage in the first place, in part by forcing business to take back all the packaging that grossly inflates the waste stream.

"We ought to make 'disposable' an obscene word."

NEXT IN THE SERIES: Climate change and waste



A waste-to-energy plant in Trezzo, Italy, that Covanta says is the model for its proposed incinerator in Gold River on Vancouver Island.

Others also lining up for our garbage

Landfilling a tonne of garbage is the energy equivalent of burying a barrel of oil in the ground.

That's the rationale that New Jersey-based Covanta Energy believes will ultimately favour its proposed waste-to-energy plant at a defunct pulp mill in Gold River, on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

"We're ready to go," said Covanta vice-president Tom Lyons. "If we had a waste contract with Metro Vancouver we could be in the ground and under construction within six months."

Unlike Metro's preferred in-region incinerator, the Gold River plant already has environmental approvals in place and could be built in less than three years.

Garbage would be loaded at New Westminster and barged 200 kilometres around the Island to Gold River.

An estimated 90 megawatts of electricity generated from burning waste would be sold to the B.C. Hydro grid, helping power the Island and offsetting the use of natural gas-fired generators.

Lyons says there's also potential for a new industrial user to locate at Gold River and take residual heat.

Metro wouldn't pay up-front capital costs but would pay a per tonne tipping fee to use the plant.

Regional district officials say it would be far costlier – similar to what they'd pay to use Cache Creek – because Covanta, not Metro, would profit from power and heat sales.

Covanta officials counter that the "intellectual case" for an in-region incinerator may be strong, but predict a public fearful of emissions simply won't accept it.

Opponents of incineration believe it would worsen air pollution in the Fraser Valley and emit ultrafine toxic nanoparticles, which are undetectable, unscrubbable and may pose serious health risks.

A burner in distant Gold River, in contrast, has local support and would defuse air quality concerns in the Lower Mainland.

Gold River isn't the only contender for Metro waste if the region is forced to pursue out-of-region disposal.

The Roosevelt regional landfill in southern Washington State was eyed as a short-term destination for Metro waste until the provincial government said last summer it would ban out-of-province garbage exports.

But despite the talk, the province has passed no legislation and waste from Whistler, Powell River and the Cowichan Valley continues to go to the Roosevelt landfill.

The province okayed waste exports to the U.S. landfill by Powell River as recently as January, an approval that has the dump's operators wondering if B.C.'s anti-export stance is shifting.

"We're a very good interim option for Metro Vancouver," said Roosevelt landfill spokesman Joe Casalini. "It's not a proposed facility. It's operational."

Competition is good in the eyes of Metro politicians, who hope they are left with more options than just sending waste to Cache Creek.

If the Interior landfill is the only place Metro garbage can go, they say, the sky is the limit on what taxpayers might be forced to pay.

Where our garbage goes

Metro Vancouver disposes of 1.5 million tonnes of garbage (after recycling and diversion) per year:

- 35 % to Vancouver Landfill in Delta

- 27 % to Cache Creek regional landfill
- 19 % to Burnaby waste-to-energy incinerator
- 19 % to demolition/landclearing/construction landfills

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