

Why Tax Credits for Landfill Gas Energy Recovery Is the *Wrong* Strategy

Tax credits for landfill gas energy recovery seem on the surface to be a no-brainer. Why squander – the argument goes – the energy value in gas generated from our garbage that is currently being flared off?

But that falsely attractive claim is erected on a succession of fallacies that, once correctly understood, speak resoundingly against subsidizing landfill gas energy recovery. The points are summarized below and documented in the attached **TECHNICAL APPENDIX**.

! Most landfill gases from rotting trash are not captured but are released to the air

Due to enormous inefficiencies of collection systems, most landfill gases created from rotting garbage are not captured, but instead are emitted uncontrolled into the air. Foremost among those gases is methane, which is a major contributor to global warming. But other gases released include known carcinogenic and lethal nerve gases that presumably lie behind adverse health impacts observed among people living in proximity to landfills.

(“ TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 1)

! The obsolete practice of landfilling organic matter is what leads to landfill gases

These problems would not exist were it not for the practice of permitting organic material to be discarded with our trash into landfills. For it is the decomposition of organic material, which constitutes 61% of what we bury in landfills, that creates many of those gases as it degrades. Methane also transports cancer causing volatile organic and other dangerous compounds into the air.

(“ TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 4)

! Discarding organic material into landfills also threatens groundwater

Discarding decomposable matter into landfills also threatens our drinking water supplies, because organics are what keeps the encased waste load biologically active, producing toxic-laden leachate for centuries. Yet landfill liners intended to isolate the toxics from drinking water are expected by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to deteriorate in decades. This means we have not prevented groundwater contamination, but rather only postponed its occurrence.

(“ TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 5)

! The real issue is how to eliminate organic material from landfills

The disposition of the minor fraction of gases generated in landfills that is actually captured, while not inconsequential, is vastly overshadowed by a greater problem. The salient issue is whether we will commit, as Europe has already done, to phasing out disposal of organic matter in landfills. Inert matter is the only material that can be safely managed in the ground.

(“ TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 6)



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(" TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 6)

! The solution is expanded composting and other bioconversion technologies

One potential strategy to avoid the insurmountable problems whenever organic matter is buried in the ground is "outside the landfill box," but well within our trove of experience. Just as we do with our containers and newspapers that we separate for recycling, we need to develop effective and comprehensive strategies such as separating for composting or other bioconversion our food scraps, yard trimmings and unrecovered paper that create landfill gas. Composting, which is done above ground in controlled conditions uncontaminated by toxic substances, converts a problem into an opportunity. Nutrients in the organic material are recovered in order to help restore fertility to our gardens, farms and forests.

(" TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 7)

! Tax credits for disposal will forestall positive alternatives

Many of the benefits from earlier landfill gas tax credits has gone to landfills in states with high electricity rates where energy recovery is already economic and systems would have been installed without the credit. Consequently, the primary impact of the credit is to reduce the cost of disposal relative to the positive alternatives which really address the problem.

(" TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 7)

! Landfill gas energy recovery should be required, not subsidized

That does not mean that the small portion of the landfill gases that are captured shouldn't be used to generate power. They should be. However, just as we do with liners and leachate collection systems, collection of, and energy production from, landfill methane should be mandated. Doing so will accomplish the agreed upon objective, without discouraging alternatives that can solve the problem. The last thing to encourage is perpetuation of an obsolete technology that impedes the essential conversion.

(" TECHNICAL APPENDIX p. 12)

