



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Media Statement

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No to Mindless Incineration and Landfilling of Waste

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) are very disappointed with the government of Malaysia's target of each state having at least one incinerator of waste-to-energy (WTE) plant within the next two years, as reported in Bernama news.

Incineration is an unsustainable way of dealing with resources and the most expensive way to manage waste and produce electricity. Waste incineration or so called "waste-to-energy" facility is an 'end-of-pipe' approach for resource and waste management that does not tackle the problem at source.

Minister of Housing and Local Government Zuraida Kamaruddin was quoted saying that incineration would make for a cleaner process of solid waste disposal which would also save on land use as it would not require opening up new rubbish disposal sites in the future. Mind you, waste-to-energy facilities do not miraculously make waste disappear.

The process of incineration merely transforms the waste into other forms of waste, such as toxic ash and air and water pollution, which are harder to contain and usually more toxic than the original form of the waste. Hazardous ash amount to as much as 30% of the total waste burned. The bottom ash from incinerators has to be landfilled whilst the fly ash which is considered scheduled waste has to be treated and disposed as well.

All incinerators pose considerable risks to the health and environment of neighbouring communities as well as that of the general population. Even the most "advanced" incinerators release thousands of pollutants that contaminate our air, soil and water. Many of these pollutants enter the food supply and concentrate up through the food chain.

Incinerators are major emitters of cancer-causing dioxins and furans. A public health impact report states that modern incinerators in the European Union are a major source of ultra-fine particulate emissions¹. In 2017, another study revealed that particulate matter contributed to over 4 million premature deaths globally in 2015².

Regulatory agencies in the United States of America have found that incinerators are prone to various types of malfunctions, system failures and breakdowns, which routinely lead to serious air pollution control problems and increased emissions that are dangerous to public health³.

The Minister also stated that rubbish disposal using incinerators will produce electrical energy and gas, the contractor will generate income from the sale of electricity and gas to cover the cost of building the WTE plant.

In actual fact, incinerators are a massive waste of energy. Due to the low calorific value of waste, incinerators are only able to generate small amounts of energy while destroying large amounts of reusable materials. Because energy produced by “waste-to-energy” incinerators is marginal, it will not contribute substantially to the electricity grid.

Moreover, since waste in Asia is mostly organic, incinerators would need additional energy input to first process the waste to make it suitable for burning, and then burn it, negatively affecting the energy balance of these facilities. The Malaysian government should learn from past experiences and not repeat the same mistakes.

From the broader perspective of sustainability, incinerators are a losing proposition and are fundamentally incompatible with a closed-loop and circular economy. They are essentially destroyers of discarded products and materials, and concentrators of toxicity.

More than 90% of materials currently disposed of in incinerators and landfills can be reused, recycled and composted. Burning these materials in order to generate electricity discourages much needed efforts to conserve resources and reduce packaging and waste, and also undermines energy-conserving practices such as recycling and composting.

Globally, there is a strong move away from incineration and towards Zero Waste. In Malaysia too many communities are embracing zero waste and working towards minimising waste generation. A focus on Zero Waste approaches to waste and resource management, which include reduction, reuse, recycling and composting, are cost-effective and safer options that generate jobs while protecting the climate and the environment.

The Malaysian government needs to look beyond the PR of “waste-to-energy” companies and choose options that promote, not undermine, sustainability.

Go Zero Waste! Don't Burn or Bury Waste!

S. M. Mohamed Idris
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¹ Howard, C.Vyvan, Statement of Evidence, Particulate Emissions and Health, Proposed Ringaskiddy Waste-to-Energy Facility, June 2009

² Health Effects Institute. 2017. State of Global Air 2017. Special Report. Boston, MA:Health Effects Institute. https://www.stateofglobalair.org/sites/default/files/SoGA2017_report.pdf.

³ Massachusetts Department of Environment citations for violations by Covanta Haverhill Incinerator: http://www.cjcw.org/notice/Covanta_Massachusetts_environmental_violations.pdf