

Reexamining the Recycling and WTE Compatibility Issue

Jonathan V. L. Kiser, M.B.A.
Kiser Environmental Consulting
3745 Nutmeg Court
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22801
540/801-8899 (w)
540/801-8859 (f)
jvfkiser@aol.com

Overview

This paper provides an updated look at whether materials recycling and waste-to-energy (WTE) operations are compatible in 19 communities across the United States. Research results, completed in December 2005, address compatibility concerns raised by some regulators and members of the environmental community. They also answer how communities with operating WTE plants respond to such concerns, based on what they have observed and actually experienced managing municipal solid waste. New statistics are provided on the type and amount of materials recovered on-site at WTE operations for subsequent recycling, the recycling rates in featured WTE communities (i.e., including off-site programs), what materials are included in such rates, and whether WTE is preventing or facilitating higher recycling percentages. The paper also provides specific evidence demonstrating other ways the two management options compliment or work against one another, from the community perspective.

Primary Findings

The full range and depth of topics covered by the 2005 research goes beyond the time limitations of the conference session. The complete research results are available from the author. Key paper findings include:

- 95% of the WTE communities contacted specifically reported that their WTE plant has not limited the community recycling rate;
- 95% of the WTE communities reported that their investment in WTE capital infrastructure has not limited their investment in recycling infrastructure;
- A community's recycling rate does not appear to be negatively influenced by a WTE plant's demand for municipal waste, or by the existence of put or pay contracts. Ten of the 12 communities contacted (83%) with put or pay contracts also reported that their recycling programs are expanding. Further, two of the three WTE communities reporting no recycling growth do not have put or pay contracts;
- When asked to comment on the notion that WTE is not compatible with recycling since it burns paper and plastic, all but one WTE community provided a response indicating that the two are compatible;
- 11% (i.e., two) of the communities noted that a low WTE tip fee results in less financial incentive to recycle. This suggests that a community must sometimes be willing to pay more to recycle if the WTE tip fee is low;