

Ontario Facing a Looming Crisis in Managing Waste



By Nigel Guilford

President of the Ontario Waste Management Association

The Ontario Waste Management Association (OWMA) is extremely concerned about waste disposal in this province. We are on the brink of a waste management crisis, a crisis that will occur unless the provincial government acts quickly to implement an integrated waste management plan to handle the province's waste within its own boundaries.

Ontario is the worst jurisdiction in Canada when it comes to ensuring it has the capacity to manage its own waste. No other province ships more than one-third of its garbage destined for landfill to another jurisdiction, let alone another country.

That's 3.5 million tonnes of garbage per year, which means that every day, six days a week, more than 370 tractor trailer loads of waste cross the U.S. border into Michigan.

The OWMA commissioned an independent study to obtain an objective picture of the waste management situation in this province today and in the years to come. The study demonstrates that the lack of landfill capacity in Ontario is reaching crisis proportions. This situation will become much worse over the next five years. By 2010 the capacity to

dispose of this waste in Ontario landfills will drop by 50 per cent. This would result in even more of Ontario's waste needing to be sent to the U.S. for disposal.

We are now exporting 3.5 million tonnes of waste to Michigan. This is both household waste and waste from business activities.

At our current rate of diversion of about 25 per cent, that number will increase to nearly 5 million tonnes in 2010. This is a direct result of our lack of capacity. If we are able to divert 40 per cent of the waste we generate beginning right now, we will be sending more than 3 million tonnes of waste to Michigan until 2016, and a lot more in subsequent years. If 60 per cent of the waste we generate can be diverted, we will still be sending about 1.5 million tonnes of waste to Michigan. We simply don't have a plan to dispose of the waste we generate, regardless of how much recycling and diversion takes place.

The State of Michigan is looking for ways to close the border to Ontario's waste. It has implemented restrictions on the import of waste and is exploring more ways to keep our garbage out of the state, including substantially increasing fees it charges on waste that crosses the border.

Border closings, delays at border crossings and inspections of Ontario waste crossing into the U.S. are already causing major problems in managing the disposal of waste.

An alarming fact is that if the Canada-U.S. border was to shut down tomorrow, Ontario's waste management industry would only have capacity to manage the situation for two days. That's because waste transfer stations are not allowed by the province to store large quantities of waste – nor do they have the space - and landfills now operating in Ontario do not have the capacity to dramatically increase the rate at which they can accept waste.

If the border were to close, there would be profound impacts on public health and safety, our environment and the economy of this province, since there would be no way to safely dispose of the waste we generate.

Even if the Ontario government puts in place an integrated waste management plan tomorrow, the province is still at risk of having nowhere to put the waste that needs to be disposed. It typically takes about seven years to gain the necessary approvals for a landfill to begin operating.

We are running out of capacity and new landfills are not being constructed because of the impediments to doing so in this province.

This is not just a problem for waste management companies, which handle waste for businesses in Ontario, but it's also a problem for municipalities - which are responsible for disposing of the household waste generated by their residents.

While the McGuinty government is not solely to blame for creating this problem, it does need to solve it, and quickly.

Successive provincial governments have failed to plan for a comprehensive, integrated system of waste management, which certainly must include disposal as well as recycling and diversion programs. There will always be a need to dispose of some of the waste we generate in our homes and businesses.

The current government has a goal to divert 60 per cent of waste away from landfill, but that alone will not solve the problem. The OWMA strongly supports diversion efforts, but we need more than that. Our increasing population and economic growth will result in even more waste being generated, despite our best efforts at diversion. We need an integrated plan that encompasses all aspects of waste management from collection to transfer, recycling, composting, incineration and disposal.

The management of waste in Ontario is an infrastructure issue that needs to be treated as such.

The problem that comes from our lack of landfill capacity in Ontario and our reliance on trucking waste to the U.S. is not just a Toronto problem – it's a problem for the entire province. Of all the solid waste that is sent to the U.S. from Ontario only about one-third of it is generated in Toronto.

The remainder comes from Peel, York, Durham, Hamilton, Halton, Kitchener, Brantford, London, Barrie, Peterborough, Sudbury and many other parts of the province. All of these areas generate either household or business waste – or both – that is currently being sent across the border to Michigan, and to a lesser extent to New York state.

If the border closes, garbage will pile up on the sidewalks of Ontario towns and cities, and the businesses that drive our economy will face a very serious problem – almost immediately - of not being able to dispose of their wastes.

For this reason, we believe the provincial government should treat waste management as an infrastructure issue, and not just an environmental issue.

Ontario's economy, the health and safety of its citizens, and the environment are at risk unless the McGuinty government takes action now. There is a critical need to dispose of our own waste in our own province, and that need is growing.

We are calling on the provincial government to look at the entire waste picture and to develop an integrated, planned system of waste management, instead of what we have now – which is a fragmented, stop-gap approach.

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Daily Newspapers

Peterborough Examiner

Owen Sound Sun Times

Chatham Daily News

Belleville Intelligencer (slotted for publication)

St. Catharines Standard

Stratford Beacon Herald (slotted for publication)

Lindsay Daily Post

Guelph Mercury

Community Newspapers

Woodstock Sentinel Review

Bracebridge Examiner

Durham region newspapers

Orangeville Citizen

Oakville Beaver

Burlington Post

Mississauga News