

Opinion: California's missing the boat on trash-to-power technology

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In 2010, after recycling, California put 35 million tons of municipal waste into landfills. The organic materials in this waste stream contain the energy equivalent of more than 60 million barrels of crude oil. Theoretically, from just this single waste resource, California could produce 1.6 billion gallons of advanced, non-food-derived biofuels and some 1,250 megawatts of power, potentially reducing the amount of waste that we place in landfills by up to 80 percent.

However, for more than six years, a small minority of my fellow Democrats -- those on the state's environmental committees -- have blocked corrective legislation that would enable the sustainable production of renewable energy from organic wastes.

In California today, conversion technologies face a permitting process more rigorous than would be required to construct a major solid waste landfill, a process that, even if it were successful, could take up to five years. And there is a scientifically inaccurate definition of gasification in statute, which requires that the entire biorefining process create zero emissions -- a physical impossibility and a standard required of no other manufacturing facility in the state. This has discouraged, indeed has prevented, this industry from attempting to operate in California.

As a result, California's biobased technology companies have located something approaching \$1 billion in renewable energy plant construction in other states, setting California's program of advanced biofuel production back by at least a decade and prolonging its reliance on landfills as the only practical disposal alternative.

In contrast, over the past 18 months, the Obama administration has awarded more than \$1 billion in direct grants and loan guarantees to commercialize the very same technologies.

Last year, when corrective legislation had passed the Assembly and was ready for final Senate passage and signature by the governor, the five Democrats on the Senate's Environmental Quality Committee gutted and then amended its language in an attempt to make it even more difficult to use municipal solid waste as a fuel for renewable energy production. This legislation had previously been endorsed by more than 100 stakeholders statewide, including the California Air Resources Board, the Energy Commission and CalRecycle (the Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery).

In December, CalRecycle issued a finding that Plasco Energy of Canada, winner of a request for proposal to build a waste-to-clean energy facility for the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority, could meet the intent of the existing definition of gasification. Legally, there could be no other interpretation, because it would never be the intent of the Legislature to pass a law with which no one can comply. However, the office of the Senate's president pro tem has now written to the administration demanding a rescission of this ruling.

This was a damaging signal that the state is not interested in what this multibillion-dollar industry can contribute to California's economy, nor does it want its help in meeting California's environmental goals for Assembly Bill 32 and the Low Carbon Fuel Standard, or its mandates for 33 percent renewable electricity production and 10 percent ethanol blending.

The Plasco Energy Group was selected by the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority after more than two years of competitive bidding and evaluation. It intends to comply with all applicable state and local laws and legitimate environmental standards.

As technology changes, so should Democrats. When I looked closely at these technologies, I changed my mind.

In a free market economy, the waste-to-clean-energy industry has just as much right to be permitted and operate under California's stringent environmental laws as any other. National security, the economy, jobs, energy independence and an improved environment demand this.

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