

The waste-to-energy solution

Edition: June 28, 2012 | Volume: 40 | No: 25

The time to get serious about Puerto Rico's solid waste is here, and it came with the sobering impact of an uppercut straight to the jaw.

New federal regulations issued last fall have Puerto Rico facing a scenario in which most of the island's landfills could be closed by October 2014.

The environmental threats generated by poorly operated landfills, which forced the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to lay down the law, have put pressure on the local authorities to figure out how to dispose of trash as we lead up to 2014 and beyond.

Truth be told, Puerto Rico must look past the current regulatory flurry to take advantage of tremendous economic-development opportunities that exist in fixing Puerto Rico's dysfunctional waste management apparatus.

It will take a precise mix of waste-to-energy (WTE) plants combined with recycling operations. All told, the garbage crisis could spark a \$2.5 billion investment in solid-waste infrastructure over the next 20 years and should double the size of Puerto Rico's recycling market.

An enormous step in the right direction was the recent preliminary endorsement by the EPA of the \$500 million Energy Answers company's WTE plant in Arecibo. In the works for nearly three decades, the project is expected to create 3,800 jobs in its development phase and 150 jobs after start-up.

The seven months it took for the project to obtain preliminary approval by the EPA opened the door for Gov. Luis Fortuño to accuse EPA Administrator Judith Enck of dragging her heels. Enck's critics see the slow pace of approval as an action underpinned by significant differences in waste-management philosophy. The EPA under the administration of President Barack Obama is officially against WTE as a cornerstone of waste management, after touting it as the answer in the days of former President George W. Bush.

In Enck's view, the answer is in recycling. She believes Puerto Rico must strive to achieve recycling levels closer to the 35% benchmark that was to have been reached in 2006.

The EPA administrator must come to grips with reality: Puerto Rico's official recycling rate remains at the 11.31% it registered in 2008 and the target date to hit 35% has been moved back to 2016.

To its credit, the local Solid Waste Management Authority (SWMA) has been pushing municipalities to implement recycling through a \$7 million incentives program. The government agency also has an \$8 million annual fund destined to help landfills achieve compliance with the new EPA regs.

The key here is to have a comprehensive strategy that works within the framework of Puerto Rico's realities, and that

means not establishing a false choice between WTE and recycling, which is what some observers claim the EPA is doing.

Perhaps Environmental Quality Board President Pedro Nieves Miranda put it best when he said: "Puerto Rico is still 35 miles by 100 miles; it isn't growing. This waste-to-energy plant is part of the solution to handling our solid-waste problem, along with increased waste reduction and recycling."

Proponents such as the EQB president point to 400 WTE plants operating across densely populated Europe and 78 operating in the mainland U.S., with more under construction as evidence the technology is a perfect fit for Puerto Rico's limited space.

Undoubtedly, Puerto Rico must pursue the higher recycling levels that experts have set, but not at the expense of very important WTE projects, which, incidentally, separate material for recycling.

This is no time for false choices tracing to environmental philosophies. The time for talking trash is over.