

Hong Kong Waste Management
Hong Kong Outdoors

Currently, planned mega incinerator looks set to be a major component of Hong Kong's waste management strategy.

As you know, several problems with this. I've heard incinerator described as necessary evil – as if it's the only option available to us.
This is not true.

Incineration is wasteful – particularly given the majority of waste will be thrown into the fire without sorting.

Pollution is an issue: both emissions, and ash so toxic that in UK it is classed as toxic waste. You know Hong Kong had four waste incinerators, but closed them all over pollution concerns. Yet now, there are plans for a new one.

The site by Shek Kwu Chau is in a beautiful part of Hong Kong; important for wildlife including globally endangered finless porpoise.

The government is strongly pushing for the incinerator.

I have a scientific background, with a PhD in physical chemistry; so look for science here.

Instead, see not science, not balanced arguments on part of government. But propaganda: powerful bias towards incinerator.

Information from the Environmental Protection Department and its consultant, AECOM, is relentlessly positive about mass burn incineration.

Hearing and reading information from the EPD, we don't hear of UK research into modern incinerators blamed for increased infant deaths, or a US incinerator blamed for asthma cases three times higher in surrounding area.

Don't hear of incinerator closed down after violating emissions standards. It was for sale recently, if anyone would like a second hand polluting industry.

If you research yourself, you can readily find more problems with incinerators.

You can also find that there is a variety of waste projects underway at present. Yet it's hard to find a mass burn incinerator among them.

Indeed, New York has requested options for waste treatment – and specifically said that they cannot include mass burn incineration.

Today, we're hearing of an array of strategies for dealing with waste.

San Francisco, for instance, is aiming for zero waste. Already, achieved around 77% diversion of waste that would have gone to landfill – depending on the way

you calculate percentages, this may be three times higher than Hong Kong manages.

Toronto is aiming for reduction and recycling; and treats food waste using a process known as anaerobic digestion – planning to use the biogas to generate energy.

You may also hear of plasma arc treatment, which involves heating gases to several thousand degrees centigrade – blasting any large molecules to fragments. There are minimal emissions; no ash: instead, just an inert glass-like material.

Asked about plasma arc, the EPD and AECOM Hong Kong have said it's no use for us: too small scale, lots of problems etc.

Is it so useless?

Look around the world and you find that plasma arc is being deployed, including in new projects such as a 950 tonne per day facility in the UK.

Here's a quote from AECOM in the US:

And there are companies that say they can build plasma arc facilities for Hong Kong, at far lower cost than the Shek Kwu Chau incinerator, and with no need for an artificial island in a remote location.

Importantly, all can include waste sorting, to remove material that can be reused and recycled

- and if a plasma arc facility has insufficient "fresh" waste, it can treat waste mined from a landfill. A major project is being launched in Belgium, to mine a landfill in order to recover materials like metals, and generate electricity.

So is plasma arc a magical process, which is perfect?

Of course not.

But the only ideal solution to waste is to have no waste in the first place.

In my view, plasma arc looks promising for Hong Kong, but must be combined with far better recycling and reuse, and waste reduction, and maybe with other waste technologies.

But that's my view. Others differ.

So where should we go now?

First, it is crucial that Legco says No to the incinerator plans.

Don't be misled by the propaganda.

Don't be afraid that by saying No, you make it inevitable that Hong Kong will be suddenly buried in a horrible pile of waste.

There are alternatives; all look better in many ways than mass burn incineration.

It is time for a rethink.

Time to emulate New York – which has requested waste treatment strategies from companies involved in actually treating waste.

We'll need a good judging panel, which can operate without initial bias. Perhaps, then, AECOM Hong Kong should not be a key decision maker.

The incinerator project looks crazy, in so many ways.

The 2005 waste strategy says we will have a state of the art technology for waste treatment.

You can help make sure this is the case, so Hong Kong has a waste treatment strategy we can be proud of, not something hidden behind a remote island.

No to the Incinerator!