

Stop Trashing Our Air Act:

Where Will the Waste Go if We Don't Burn It??

- Existing transfer station and landfill capacity can easily handle the amount we currently burn.
- The Philadelphia Department of Sanitation collects 48% of Philly's 1.3 million yearly tons of trash.
- Of that annual 610,000 tons of waste, 180,000 is sent to Reworld for incineration.
- Republic, the world's second largest waste hauler, has two trash transfer stations in the city and two landfills in rural areas. These facilities have enough capacity to fulfill Philly's waste contract for the next seven-year contract term and for additional years beyond that.

Where waste currently goes under Philly's contracts

Philadelphia produces nearly 1.3 million tons of municipal solid waste (trash) per year. About half of that is collected by the City Department of Sanitation (from residences with up to six units). The rest is managed by the private sector.

There are two contracts for disposal of the trash collected by the City. The largest one (for 70% of the city-collected trash) is held by WM (formerly known as Waste Management), where waste is mainly landfilled at Fairless Landfill in Bucks County. The contract for the other 30% is with Reworld (formerly named Covanta) for incineration, mainly in the City of Chester, but a much smaller fraction is burned at their incinerator in Plymouth Township, Montgomery County.

Where waste will go if we stop burning...

Passage of the Stop Trashing Our Air Act would disqualify Reworld and most likely result in Republic landing the smaller contract. Republic already has infrastructure to handle the 180,000 tons of trash per year that is currently handled by Reworld.

For 180,000 tons/year, that means we need capacity for 493 tons/day (tpd). The capacity of their facilities is:

Trash transfer stations within the city:

- Quickway Transfer Station in Philly (500 tpd)
- Envirowaste Transfer Station in Philly (1,400 tpd)

Republic would then haul trash from these trash transfer stations to either or both of these two rural landfills:

- Conestoga Landfill in Berks County (5,210 tpd)
- Modern Landfill in York County (4,667 tpd)

Republic has confirmed that they have adequate excess capacity to handle at least another 200,000 tons/year.

Conestoga Landfill is permitted to accept an average of 5,210 tpd. In 2024, they accepted an average of 2,835 tpd. This leaves another 2,375 tpd – 4.8 times more than needed to take the waste Philly burns.

Modern Landfill is permitted to accept an average of 4,667 tpd. In 2024, they accepted an average of 2,508 tpd. This leaves another 2,159 tpd – 4.4 times more than needed to take the waste Philly burns.

So, there's enough permitted capacity (*rate of dumping per day or per year*) at each of these two landfills. But do they have the space left for another 7-year contract without another expansion?

U.S. EPA data on remaining landfill capacity show that if the dumping rate at Conestoga Landfill stayed at 2024 levels and they took an additional 200,000 tons per year from Philly (which assumes a waste increase and no waste reduction efforts), the landfill has room until 2036, three years after a new 7-year contract would expire. However, landfills expand routinely and are not allowed to seek an expansion permit unless there are fewer than five years of space left, making it seem as if landfills are constantly running out of capacity.

Incineration still uses landfills. Toxic ash produced by burning Philly's trash is also filling up landfills. Every 100 tons burned results in nearly 30 tons of ash, which is dumped in Rolling Hills Landfill (Berks County), Lanchester Landfill (Lancaster County), Pioneer Crossing Landfill (Berks County), Conestoga Landfill (Berks County), Fairless Landfill (Bucks County), and Modern Landfill (York County). Incineration makes landfills smaller, but more toxic.

Zero Waste alternatives reduce need for landfills

It's better to make landfills smaller by actually reducing, reusing, recycling, and composting waste than by burning, which creates large air pollution and public health problems. Implementing just one or two of the basic building blocks of a Zero Waste system could cut down waste by more than the amount we incinerate. This can be implemented in just a few years, which we should do once we stop using incinerators, to reduce use of landfills and extend the life of those landfills.