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Garbage is something that everybody has but nobody wants - right? Apparently the opposite is true in Sweden. Sweden has been so successful at using almost all of its own trash to produce energy that Norway is now paying Sweden to dispose of its garbage as well. [1] According to Swedish Waste
Management, the incineration of household trash provides enough energy to power 250,000 homes and to meet one-fifth of the country’s heat production needs.[2] Only four percent of the nation’s trash ends up in landfills.[3] Strangely, waste incineration does not seem to be a hot topic in the current American alternative energy debate. The United States has made some progress toward using incineration as a way both to create energy and to reduce the amount of trash that ends up in landfills, but the practice is underutilized on this side of the Atlantic.

There are currently 86 waste-to-energy trash incinerators in the United States.[4] The Environmental Protection Agency reports that in 2010, about 29 million tons of the nation’s municipal solid waste (about 12% of total waste) was combusted to create energy.[5] Capturing the methane from buried trash decomposing in landfills is another way to utilize trash as an energy source; however, EPA researchers found that incinerating trash can generate up to 10 times the amount of electricity from the same amount of waste.[6]

Regulations of waste-to-energy technology do not appear to be hindering development. Recent adaptations to relevant EPA regulations seem to encourage the use of processes that derive energy from waste. Amendments include the clarification of which materials used in the combustion process are considered “solid waste” for purposes of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).[7] The definition under the Act determines whether a “combustion unit” qualifies as a waste incineration unit and must meet emissions standards under the Clean Air Act.[8]

Another example concerns regulation of a waste-to-energy process. “Gasification” is a process which “converts any material containing carbon—such as coal, petroleum coke... or biomass—into synthesis gas (syngas),” which can then be burned to produce electricity or further processed to manufacture chemicals, fertilizers, liquid fuels, substitute natural gas (SNG), or hydrogen.”[9] In 2008 the EPA excluded “oil-bearing hazardous secondary materials” from the definition of “solid waste,” so that the materials that are used for “gasification” have the same regulatory status as those same types of materials when they are placed back into the petroleum refining process.[10] The purpose of the exclusion was to classify gasification as a petroleum production activity rather than a waste management activity, despite the fact that the production involves reusing waste materials.[11] The emphasis of regulation shifted from the need for disposal of certain materials to their potential to create energy.

The challenges of pursuing energy reform are much greater for a country as large as the United States than for a small country like Sweden. Difficulties of scale aside, the United States would do well to make better use of its trash. Despite the viability of the waste-to-energy process, no new incinerators have been built in the United States since 1995.[12] Fear that the concept may undercut recycling efforts, as well as opposition to incineration, may account in part for American hesitancy.[13] Recycling and reduction of waste would be ideal. Yet currently 54% of the trash in the United States still goes into a landfill.[14] Form a “lesser evils” perspective, the waste-to-energy concept looks promising.
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Id. at 58.

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