

No time to waste: Moscow urged to recycle, not burn

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Rubbish is unloaded at a landfill site in Russia, where protests have been growing over the stench of decaying waste

Protests have been growing in recent months over the stench from landfill sites around Moscow, overflowing with millions of tonnes of

rubbish.

Authorities have now decided on a plan to tackle the problem—generating energy by burning the waste instead.

But their course of action has also sparked public fears over pollution.

Russia produces almost 70 million tonnes of rubbish per year, according to Greenpeace's estimates.

The sorting of trash only takes place in around 100 of the country's 4,000 towns and cities, and most of the waste builds up for decades in tips.

"Russia seems to be fulfilling the prediction... that mankind will die from choking on its own rubbish," said Alexei Kiselyov, of Greenpeace Russia.

The amount that Russians throw away has grown 30 percent in the last decade, Greenpeace says. Two percent is incinerated, seven percent is recycled and the rest is dumped in landfills.

Around Moscow, 24 [landfill](#) sites have been closed over the last five years because they were outdated and dangerous, the regional authorities said, while the remaining 15—enormous mountains of malodorous rubbish open to the elements—are still filling up with unsorted waste.

"Most of them were created 50 years ago without any technology to treat the gases and polluted water" that emerge from the waste, said the press service of the regional ecology ministry.

Locals up in arms

The problem first came into the public eye in June last year when the residents of Balashikha, a town six kilometres (four miles) west of Moscow's city limits, complained of the stink from a local tip directly to President Vladimir Putin on a call-in show on television, asking for it to be shut down.

The landfill site was then closed but it soon emerged that other tips were creating similar problems.

At the end of March, about 50 children received medical treatment in Volokolamsk, a town northwest of Moscow, after breathing gases emitted from a [landfill site](#).

Thousands of residents then protested, calling for the site's closure.

Russia turned to the Netherlands to provide technology to neutralise the toxic fumes, due to a lack of effective locally-made equipment.

"The worst thing is that no one pays any attention to the problem until there is a gas leak or emission of [polluted water](#) or a fire in the landfill," said Kiselyov.

Facing a looming environmental disaster, the Russian government has backed a project to build five waste-to-energy [plants](#) that will incinerate rubbish and generate electricity.

The first two plants, which can each incinerate 700,000 tonnes of rubbish per year and will each generate 70 megawatts of electricity, are to be built in 2021 in the Moscow region.

"The aim is to bring an end to the storage of rubbish in landfills," said Andrei Shipelov, director of the company, RT-Invest, that is developing the project.

Burn or recycle?

Work on building the plants is due to start in the next few weeks, but residents are stepping up their protests, fearing damage to the environment.

"We want the plants to recycle, not incinerate," said Marina Melnikova, a resident of Naro-Fominsk, saying she feared the environmental cost of any carcinogenic dioxins that could be in the emissions from the plants.

She was among 4,000 residents to sign a petition against the plan presented to Putin.

"It's true that we need to solve the problem with rubbish. But why start with the last link in the chain? What about recycling and sorting?" asked Communist party activist Igor Vavilov.

In April, protests across many towns in the region called for the closure and repurposing of landfill sites.

Several thousand demonstrators also slammed the construction of waste-power incinerators, saying sorting and recycling should be the priorities.

The project's director Shipelov rejected the criticisms, saying the plants would use "the most sophisticated technology" developed by Swiss-Japanese firm Hitachi Zosen Inova, which has already built 500 similar facilities in different countries.

"These plants absolutely aren't dangerous. No dioxins, nor any other dangerous elements will be emitted from the plants," Shipelov said.

"High temperatures of 1,260 degrees Celsius (2300 Fahrenheit) mean that the most dangerous dioxins will be destroyed inside the reactor," he

said.

Environmentalists question whether incineration is the best solution, however.

"What's the point of creating a new source of pollution when we could solve the problem with recycling plants?" asked Kiselyov, of Greenpeace.

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