

# Landfill prices don't show full waste costs

"We are heavily dependent on landfills, and we won't have alternatives until we change the economics of waste disposal," said Dr. Larry Libby.

The Michigan State University professor of agricultural economics and resource development spoke at a solid waste management gathering recently held in Southfield.

Libby, along with the other garbage disposal experts, contended that economics plays a key role in determining the fate of our trash.

The session was coordinated by the MSU Cooperative Extension Service in cooperation with the tri-county solid waste planning committees and area landfill operators.

"IN THE PAST, our attitudes and institutional practices favored landfills as the least costly means for disposing our garbage," said Libby.

Society can alter our current garbage disposal methods, he indicated, by 1) pricing land disposal operations to reflect the true costs of safely handling wastes and 2) providing financial incentives for such alternatives as resource recovery and recycling.

"We have been cavalier about waste disposal. We haven't cared about what happens to our trash after it leaves the curb," continued Libby.

He said such cavalier attitudes have resulted in the current landfill capacity problems — and a growing concern for public safety.

There is a move to use alternative ways of handling residential, commercial, and industrial waste materials (hazardous and non-hazardous).



our land  
**Penny Wright**

It's the result of a decrease in available landfill sites and the increase in groundwater contamination problems traced to improper handling at existing dumps.

ACCORDING to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, landfilling is responsible for about 13 percent of the known groundwater contamination problems statewide and 47 percent of the suspected problems.

In Oakland County alone, six out of 12 sites listed on the incident file of the state's Toxic Substance Control Commission (TSCC), a body that investigates toxic substances problems in the environment) are related to improper landfill operations.

Waste management professionals attending the session agreed that landfilling will always play a part in the waste disposal picture, but alternatives such as waste reduction, recycling, composting, and incineration will lessen reliance on land disposal.

To the extent that economics favor the alternatives, landfill usage will decline.

JERRY POWELL, a recycling consultant and editor of Resource Recycling magazine, said recycling will grow as the economics favor separating certain materials from the waste stream and processing them into raw materials or new products.

"It's a matter of supply and demand," said Powell. "Consuming recyclables is the issue. As markets grow for recycled products, through consumer preference and incentives, the recycling industry will flourish."

Powell said the benefits of recycling are numerous and include conserving energy, resources and landfill space. "Recycling is the oldest form of waste management," he said, "the Liberty Bell was made from recycled metal."

POWELL PREDICTED that as more markets are found for recycled materials, we will see a growing trend offering waste recycling as a municipal service.

"We will have two separate garbage pick-ups, with one designated only for recyclable materials," he said.

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