

Metro Manila Solid and Toxic Waste Problem: Lack of Scientific Perspective and Role of Corruption and Ignorance

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Metro Manila has a very serious solid and toxic waste disposal problem. The metropolis with close to 12 million people produces 8000 tonnes of solid waste per day. Yet, with this inexorable problem, incineration has been banned by the Congress there is no single working sanitary landfill. What are available are controlled and open dumpsites which are environmental disasters in their own right. One of the most notorious of these dumpsites is Payatas, which has had a slope failure that killed dozens a few years ago. But the real contradiction in Payatas is that it was sited less than 500 m away from the main drinking surface water repository of Metro Manila. Another sorry situation is the San Mateo Sanitary Landfill, which despite some flaws, is the only designed landfill in the metropolis. San Mateo was closed by a court injunction because the garbage trucks enroute to delivering solid waste were causing severe traffic and air pollution close to posh residential homes. These residents were energized and got the services of a very skillful lawyer who successfully convinced the highest court in the land to close the only landfill which still had 5 years capacity. Much toxic waste are also disposed in the open dumps. Government's efforts to solve the problem have been hindered severely by corruption at high levels. Two former cabinet secretaries unilaterally approved an onerous and expensive contract for solid waste incineration for Metro Manila without due bidding process. Efforts to rectify this situation are stymied in courts—meanwhile, the garbage dumps continue to pile up higher everyday. On the other extreme, intense lobbying by radical environmental groups succeeded in outlawing incineration in the Congress. Even hospital infectious waste cannot anymore be incinerated with the current law. In contrast to the very strict law, the open dumps with no extraction infrastructure spew methane into the atmosphere, causing huge fires (there goes the incineration ban) and spreading dioxin and furan pollution in the populace. The solid and toxic waste disposal problem in Metro Manila is not due to lack of science and engineering personnel. It demonstrates lack of political will crippled by corruption and fueled by ignorance in the populace.