

DENR renews push for waste-to-energy solution to address urban garbage woes

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Business Mirror, January 4, 2017

With the failure of the local government units (LGUs) to enforce Republic Act (RA) 9003, or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000, an official of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said there is no other way to solve the country's garbage problem but through the adoption of waste-to-energy (WTE) technologies.

Environment Undersecretary for Foreign Assisted and Special Projects Jonas Leones told the BusinessMirror that, in line with President Duterte's policy direction, the DENR is exploring partnerships in pursuit of WTE projects.

Leones likened WTE to "hitting two birds with one stone." He said it will not only address the garbage problem, but will also help "energize" the country and lessen the country's dependence on coal-fired power plants.

Leones added that the Philippines has been promoting proper waste management since the RA 9003, but with apparent little success. Some local officials, in fact, are now facing charges for alleged failure to enforce the garbage law, which includes proper waste segregation, recycling and composting, including the shutting down of open dumps in their respective jurisdictions.

While the DENR continues to promote proper solid-waste management as mandated by law, Leones said, the DENR is also exploring partnerships with Japan, and is eyeing 10 new WTE projects this year.

The partnership between the Philippines and Japan for WtE cooperation was set in motion during a visit by Japanese environment officials in Manila last November.

The two countries are eyeing WTE cooperation in Quezon City and Davao City as potential pilot sites and are mulling over 10 more projects this year.

Japan's Ministry of Environment, led by Shigemoto Kajihara, vice minister for global environmental affairs, met with Leones to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries on waste management, especially on WTE.

Energy from waste is in line with Duterte's plan to address the looming garbage crisis in the Philippines, consistent with the DENR and National Solid Waste Management Commission's (NSWMC) plan to promote WTE using advanced technologies that hurdle environmental standards.

"There's already a guideline on WTE. Not all incinerations are prohibited by law," Leones stressed, insisting that there are incineration technologies that comply with dioxin emissions standard.

The President visited Japan last October and brought home 12 major Japanese investments worth P89.73 billion. These investments are expected to generate 250,000 jobs for Filipinos.

The first environment dialogue on waste management between the Philippines and Japan was held in October 2015, wherein both countries agreed to identify model areas to promote cooperation between Manila and Tokyo on waste management.

Since then, joint workshops on waste management between two countries, to deepen understanding of the current situation of waste-management practices in the two countries, were held.

During the dialogue last November, the Ministry of Environment of Japan proposed to provide a comprehensive support, with Quezon City and Davao City as model cities for WTE, together with Osaka and Kitachushu, through a “sisterhood” pact.

According to Leones, WTE technologies have legal bases, contrary to the claims of some non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citing the case of *Metropolitan Manila Development Authority v. JanCom Environmental Corp.*, wherein the Supreme Court stated that “not all incineration violate the law.”

“Incineration [technology] that complies with emission standard is allowable,” Leones said. He added that over the years, the DENR has been investing on capacity building.

“We now have a laboratory that can measure dioxins/furants,” Leones said, referring to a dioxins/furans (D/F) laboratory at the DENR’s Environmental Management Bureau (EMB).

“In the ruling of the SC, not all incinerations are bad and are prohibited by law,” he said.

NGOs, such as the EcoWaste Coalition, stiffly oppose WTE, saying that such technology employs waste incineration, which, it insisted, violates the Clean Air Act.

The EcoWaste Coalition was among the many groups that supported Duterte’s appointment of Regina Paz L. Lopez as DENR secretary.

“In our statement in June 2016, we expressed our hope that Gina would opt to join Duterte’s Cabinet so she can safeguard our natural resources from wanton destruction and stop peddlers of false climate and waste ‘solutions’, including thermal waste-to-energy technologies, from making inroads to the new government,” said Aileen Lucero, national coordinator, EcoWaste Coalition.

“We expected that the DENR would terminate all undertakings that are in breach of the incineration ban under the Clean Air Act and the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act, and suspend the development and implementation of coal power plants in the pipeline and so-called WTE facilities,” she said.

“Unfortunately, the waste and toxic issues that are of utmost concern to us remain unresolved,” Lucero said.

She added that Lopez, as chairman of the National Solid Waste Management Commission, has yet to rescind the pro-incineration guidelines adopted by the NSWMC, which, she said, brazenly promotes WTE.

“If not repealed, this would open the floodgates for burn or thermal waste disposal technologies, undermining the country’s efforts to sustainably address our discards, which could be reused, recycled or composted instead of being incinerated,” she pointed out.

“WTE technology that burns discards is like a Trojan horse: it may look state-of-the-art and inoffensive, but, in reality, can be a very costly venture that can cause harm to public health and even to the local economy,” Lucero warned.

The EcoWaste Coalition, Stop WTE Alliance and allied groups in environmental and climate justice movement have said that “it will be reprehensible to squander massive amounts of public funds to construct, operate and sustain WTE burners when simpler, job-creating and safer solutions exist as specified in RA 9003, or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act.”

“The threat of waste incinerators is more real today than before, especially with the public-relations success of the waste incineration industry to deceptively package WTE as power plants rather than as waste-disposal facilities despite the nominal quantity of energy in the form of electricity that is generated from the burning of trash,” they said.

“WTE is the most expensive scheme for generating electricity that is costlier to build, operate and maintain compared to coal and nuclear-power plants and the various renewable-energy sources as reported by the US Energy Information Administration,” the groups pointed out.

“It will be unconscionable to burn discards, as this will deprive poor individuals and families and small businesses, many of whom form part of the under-recognized and underprotected informal waste sector, of useful materials for recycling-based livelihoods,” they said.