

EcoWaste to DENR: Disallow incineration of COVID-19 ‘wastes’

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MANILA, Philippines — Non-profit environmental group EcoWaste Coalition is calling on the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to revoke an advisory that allows the use of incinerators and crematories on COVID-19 healthcare waste.

The use of such disposal methods is both detrimental to the environment and “not aligned with the spirit and intent of relevant laws,” specifically Republic Act 8749, or the Clean Air Act, and Presidential Decree 856, or the Code on Sanitation of the Philippines, the group argued in a letter to DENR and the Environmental Management Bureau (EMB) on Tuesday.

The EcoWaste is referring to the March 26 advisory of the EMB on “alternative modes for the disposal of pathological and infectious COVID-19 healthcare waste,” which allows the said methods.

The group pointed out the phasing-out of incinerators for biomedical waste back in 2003 in line with the Clean Air Act, including the “state of the art” incinerators in government hospitals that were subsequently found to emit pollutants, such as dioxins, way above the standards set by the DENR.

EcoWaste Coalition also cited the Health Care Waste Management Manual published by the Department of Health (DOH), which states: “incineration used to be the method of choice in treating healthcare waste. However, with the implementation of the Clean Air Act of 1999, the use of this method is no longer allowed.”

“The DOH manual does not make any reference to ‘thermal treatment by incineration’ and ‘the use of crematorium’ for healthcare waste requiring disinfection and treatment,” the group said.

Ecowaste Coalition also stressed that listing of crematories as an option for disposal is “highly unacceptable as crematories are not designed and constructed to incinerate trash.” Under the sanitation code, a crematorium is described as “any designated place duly authorized by law to cremate dead persons.”

“From our perspective, it will be unlawful to use a crematorium for waste disinfection and treatment as it is not authorized by law to engage in such waste-related activities. Also, allowing such activities will be culturally inappropriate and will be frowned upon as our society does not consider human remains as ‘waste’ and crematories as ‘waste incinerators,’” the group argued.

“It will be culturally insensitive, from our point of view, to cremate people who have succumbed to COVID-19 and other diseases in crematories where trash is incinerated,” it added.

The group also added that it is “imprudent to even consider the use of crematorium as an option” as some crematories have not been operating in accordance to government regulations, citing the suspension of operation of a [public crematorium at the Manila North Cemetery](#) in 2016 for various violations of DENR’s regulations, including the lack of valid Permit to Operate.

“In the greater interest of public health and safety, we urge the DENR and EMB to recall or revoke the said advisory without delay, and to duly consult and collaborate with the DOH and other stakeholders on matters affecting public health and the environment,” Ecowaste Coalition said.

Edited by JPV

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