

Govt, green groups clash on WTE deals

By Jonathan L. Mayuga | Business Mirror

FEBRUARY 5, 2017



In Photo: A materials-recovery facility in Taytay, Rizal.

While pursuing the strict implementation of Republic Act (RA) 9003, or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000, the government is also looking at a quick-fix solution—by converting garbage into energy—to address the looming garbage and energy crisis in the Philippines.

Environmental groups, however, said the waste-to-energy (WTE) scheme is not the way to go. They said WTE would neither address the environmental and health problems caused by garbage, nor will it provide sustainable energy supply, like solar or hydroelectric power.

With its population of 105 million, the Philippines produces 40,000 tons of garbage a day, equivalent to 14.6 million tons of garbage a year.

With the huge volume of garbage produced every day and the failure of concerned local government units (LGUs) to enforce RA 9003, a senior official of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) considers garbage as potential source of methane fuel or electricity using various WTE technologies.

While environmental advocates are strongly opposed to WTE, the DENR and the National Solid Waste Management Commission (NSWMC), through its secretariat are finding a common ground to avoid conflict, particularly on the use of waste incinerators, which is prohibited under RA 8749, or the Clean Air Act.

PHL-Japan WTE partnership

As early as October 2016, DENR officials, led by Undersecretary for Foreign Assisted and Special Projects Jonas Leones and counterpart officials from the Japanese government, were discussing the potential of WTE in the Philippines.

During a visit in the Philippines last November, 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.

The two countries are eyeing Quezon City and Davao City as potential pilot sites. They are mulling over to start this year at least eight more similar projects in various parts of the country.

The partnership involves support from Japan cities and private companies.

Finding a common ground

As the use of incineration is the biggest hurdle in the implementation of WTE projects, officials of the DENR and NSWMC backing WTE insisted that not all incineration, are bad and will cause adverse impact to the environment.

They also insisted that there are now advance WTE technologies that do not require the use of incinerators.

According to Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez she is keen on allowing WTE under her watch on the condition that the technology will not use waste incinerators.

“As long as it is not incineration, because that [incinerators] pollute. But there are [advance] technologies,” Lopez said.

Chuck Baclagon of 350.org said as long as WTE will not involve combustion or incineration technology the government and his group will find a common ground.

He said that for 350.org, the anaerobic biodigestion-type technology is acceptable.

The technology uses micro-organisms to hasten decomposition to allow faster recovery or harvest of methane.

“It has no emission unlike incineration,” he said. While passionate about waste reduction through recycling, Lopez added that, if properly implemented, WTE has the potential to address the country’s garbage problem.

Lopez recently ordered Quezon City Mayor Herbert Bautista and Cebu City Mayor Tomas Osmeña to permanently close their respective city’s sanitary landfills to prevent water pollution.

The Payatas Sanitary Landfill is near the La Mesa Watershed, where water from Angat and Ipo dams are stored for treatment before distribution as tap water for 12 million people living in Metro Manila.

Situated in a reclaimed area, the Inayawan Sanitary Landfill in Cebu City was the subject of a Court of Appeals Special 19th Division closure order.

Legal basis

NSWMC Resolution 669, adopted on June 9, 2016, provides for the “Guidelines Governing the Establishment and Operation of WTE Technologies for Municipal Solid Wastes,” paving the way for the use of WTE.

Among the WTE technologies allowed under the guideline are gasification, pyrolysis, bioreactor, biomethanation, hydrolysis, pyrolytic gasification, plasma and other thermal processes.

“These technologies do not use incinerators. There are a number of waste-to-energy technologies that we can adopt to reduce GHG [greenhouse gases] and convert garbage into energy,” NSWMC Executive Director Ely Ildelfonso said.

On the other hand, Leones, a lawyer, said there is already a legal basis for the application of WTE, even with the use of incinerators.

Citing the case of *Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) v. JanCom Environmental Corp. (SC)*, wherein the Supreme Court said “not all incineration violate the law,” Leones had insisted that not all incineration technology is illegal.

“Incineration [technology] that complies with emission standard is allowed,” Leones said.

He added that over the years, the DENR has been investing on capacity-building by training Environment Management Bureau (EMB) employees in the use of the most sophisticated laboratory equipment to measure dioxin and furans.

The dioxins/furans laboratory at the DENR-EMB is currently being calibrated and will be ready for use by March. Paeng Lopez of Campaigner for Healthy Energy Initiative of Health Care Without Harm Asia, a member of Stop WTE Alliance, debunked the claims of the DENR and NSWMC that there is a SC order “legalizing” incinerators in the application of WTE technologies.

Lopez said Leones and Ildelfono use WTEs and incinerators interchangeably. He said the WTE guideline was approved in a haste to “legitimize waste burning.”

Quoting the SC order regarding the case *MMDA v. JanCom*, Lopez said Section 20 does not absolutely prohibit incineration as a mode of waste disposal; rather, only those burning processes which emit poisonous and toxic fumes are banned.

“If I remember it right, the World Health Organization US EPA [Environment Protection Agency] and EU consider every WTE burn process that NSWMC peddles such as pyrolysis, gasification, and plasma arc, as waste incineration. There is no waste burning process anywhere in the world that does not absolutely emit poisonous and toxic fumes,” he said.

Silver bullet?

With the failure of most LGUs to fully enforce the solid waste management law, Leones and Ildelfonso are one in saying that WTE is the country’s best option to address the looming garbage crisis.

Leones likened WTE to “hitting two birds with one stone” because it will not only address the garbage problem, it will also help “energize” the country and lessen the country’s dependence on coal-fired power plants.

Ildelfonso said the government has been relentless in pushing for the implementation of the garbage law, but with little very little success.

He said proper waste segregation, recycling and composting has the potential of reducing waste by 75 percent, leaving 25 percent residual waste. On the other hand, WTE, which uses incineration, he said, can eliminate garbage by up to 95 percent.

Poor implementation, law enforcement

Nevertheless, the NSWMC is not giving up on its mandate to oversee the implementation of RA 9003.

Last year a total of 600 local officials from 50 LGUs were slapped with criminal and administrative complaint by the Office of the Ombudsman for failing to enforce RA 9003, mostly for failing to close open dumps and controlled dumps in their respective localities.

Around 3,000 local officials belonging to 300 LGUs failed to enforce the law are facing the same fate. Most of those facing charges also failed in proper waste collection, segregation, recycling and disposal. Ildelfono said uncollected wastes are either burned in backyards, or dumped in vacant lots and unused lands. A huge chunk of garbage end up being swept away during floods, clogging esteros and rivers in the process.

Aguilar of Greenpeace said green groups are one in opposing WTE. She said various studies suggest that WTE is not a solution to garbage problem.

“There are many WTE proponents coming in. This is alarming. During the Zero Waste Month celebration, we were told that some WTE companies were there, and even had booths,” she said.

Real solution

Waste and pollution watchdogs opposed to WTE and Abigail Aguilar, Greenpeace’s toxic and waste campaigner, expressed alarm over the government’s plan to promote WTE.

“Properly implemented, waste segregation, recycling and composting will address the garbage problem,” Aguilar said.

She insisted that the DENR, NSWMC and LGUs should enforce Republic Act 9003 to the letter and the problem on waste will go away.

A member of Stop WTE Alliance agreed with Aguilar that WTE is not the solution or the silver bullet that will kill the monster created by human apathy.

“We cannot win our perpetual battle with trash unless we temper the sinister buy-and-throw-away culture in our midst. WTE technologies that burn resources, which are better recycled in a nontoxic way, will only lead to the further exploitation of the ecosystems and the generation of more waste to keep these facilities profitably running,” the Stop WTE Alliance said.

The alliance wants NSWMC’s guidelines for the establishment and operation of WTE technologies repealed and, instead, have sustainable zero waste strategies mainstreamed.

Citing the opinion of environmental scientist Dr. Jorge Emmanuel, adjunct professor at Silliman University, the alliance believes that there is no such thing as “clean incineration.”

Emmanuel had said all incinerators release toxic particulates; toxic gases, such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide; toxic metals, like lead and mercury; and other pollutants in addition to dioxins.”

In lieu of WTE technologies that terminally destroy resources and release toxic environmental pollutants, Stop WTE Alliance said the government and the private sector should invest in “real solutions,” such as intensive segregation at source, composting and recycling, extended producer responsibility, and clean production to prevent and reduce garbage volume and toxicity.

(Article retrieved from: <http://www.businessmirror.com.ph/govt-green-groups-clash-on-wte-deals/>)