



Neil Seldman

# Commentary

## FLAWED THINKING IN LONG HAULING GARBAGE

RECENTLY read *Garbage In Garbage Out: Solving Problems with Long Distance Trash Transport* by Vivian E. Thompson (University of Virginia Press, 2009) and decided that a book review was in order. The author provides a detailed and extremely helpful discussion and analysis of the current state of long haul and the complex legal and political status of flow control law and state efforts to constrain the importation of garbage from outside jurisdictions.

Thompson complements the discussion of U.S. policies with a fine comparative analysis of the “proximity principle” at work in Europe and Japan — disposal of garbage as close to the generator as possible — and how these traditions may be changing. She concludes that U.S. geography, law and political culture should not and cannot abide by the proximity principle and should instead permanently rely on long haul of waste. She suggests a national surcharge on landfilling and incineration of \$5/ton to subsidize permanent long distance movement of waste throughout the U.S.

In the book, readers are given a passing glance at other issues: recycling, composting, anti-incineration feelings, extended producer responsibility, pay as you throw. Yet, these aspects of the U.S. solid waste landscape are an afterthought with no adequate technical analysis. Thompson does propose a state based “escalator tax” on imported garbage which can help keep garbage closer to home. But, readers may wonder how this change would get through the profound barriers that exist for such “states’ rights.”

Better yet, why not a far more simple federal action: an Act of Congress that rules “garbage is not commerce.” This alone would allow states and cities to ward off out-of-area garbage as they

please, despite the Constitution’s Commerce Clause. It also would hasten the national trend, led by cities and counties, not the federal government, to the doubling of the national recycling rate (32%) and beyond. Further, the very sound idea of a landfill and incinerator disposal surcharge is better placed at the local level, where it has functioned exceedingly well for many years.

The book would benefit from details of the dramatic diversion rates in big cities and small towns. San Francisco reached 74 percent and has just implemented mandatory food scrap recovery from households and businesses. Nantucket, Massachusetts diverts over 90 percent. Los Angeles has a 64 percent rate (94 percent diversion of construction and demolition discards). The technologies, contracts, incentives and policies used in these and scores of other high performing jurisdictions are applicable for adoption and adaptation across the U.S.

Los Angeles is planning a new aggressive program based on the proximity principle. The city has been divided into six “waste sheds” that will recycle and compost as much material within each waste shed as possible, thus each sharing the burdens and benefits. The more materials handled within the waste shed, the less pressure on scarce and expensive regional landfills.

### KEEP IT SEPARATED, AND LOCAL

By keeping materials separated and close to home, jurisdictions are reducing overall solid waste management costs, creating small businesses and jobs and expanding the local tax base. At least 50 percent of all materials generated locally can be processed and marketed within the local economy — composting or digestion of yard and street debris, food waste and soiled papers, processing of construction and demolition discards and electronic scrap.

To keep other secondary materials from flowing to Asia, local governments (Alachua County, Florida, Del Norte County, California) are investing in Resource Recovery Parks, industrial parks reserved for recycling, compost processing, used materials resale, product assembly and manufacturing

companies. Hawaii County has invested in such infrastructure to attract companies to compost green waste and companies to produce diesel fuel from fats, oils and greases (FOG). The County has also made its waste transfer sites available for small companies to collect repairable and reusable products for redistribution. Massachusetts has banned C&D materials from landfills, leading to expanded deconstruction and C&D processing and recycling.

The U.S. is moving into an era of scarcity. If we do not adjust our handling of the raw materials that flow through our hands every day, then we will have to do without. And to do without is not the American way.

When growing up along the southern shores of Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s and 1960s, we faced a dilemma: sewage sludge from treatment facilities, which was piped into the Atlantic Ocean, started backing up on our beaches. Building longer pipes — taking the sludge further out to sea — solved the problem. In effect this delayed the inevitable, which came 20 years later — the ban on dumping sludge in the oceans.

By building the pipes longer, New York City only delayed real solutions — pretreatment for industrial pollutants, composting and digestion — for decades. Long distance transport of waste repeats this error. It sees the materials as a waste, not as a raw material. It forgets that using discarded materials adds positive economic value as it avoids the negative value of landfilling and incineration. ■

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