M'sia must say no to waste incineration
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Waste incinerators are toxic to public health, harmful to the economy, environment and climate, and undermine composting, recycling and waste reduction programmes.

Thus the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) is troubled to learn that the Housing and Local Government Ministry plans to conduct a three-week "working laboratory" from March 26 to study the best incineration system for Malaysia.

It is reported that experts from local universities, consultants and representatives of NGOs are expected to study the financial model and suitable locations for the facility. An international tender through a request-for-proposal method is expected to be called middle of this year.

Incinerating municipal solid waste in actual fact converts discarded materials into a variety of waste products, including bottom ash, fly ash, combustion gases air pollutants, wastewater, wastewater sludge and heat.

Incinerating these discards entails destroying billions of ringgits' worth of precious materials from a finite resource base that could be recycled into the economy.

In recent years, the incinerator industry has tried to expand their sector by marketing their technologies as "waste-to-energy" (WTE) facilities, leveraging claims of "reduced greenhouse gas emissions" and "clean energy," to seek public subsidies. Even the most technologically advanced incinerators release thousands of pollutants that contaminate our air, soil and water.

Emissions from incinerators include particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals, dioxins, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, mercury, carbon dioxide and furans.

Even small amounts of some of these toxins can be harmful to human health and the environment.

The toxic impacts of incineration are far reaching: persistent organic pollutants (POPs) such as dioxins and furans travel thousands of miles and accumulate in animals and humans.

Many of these pollutants enter the food supply and concentrate up through the food chain. Incinerator workers and people living near incinerators are particularly at high risk of exposure to these contaminants.

Contaminants are also distributed when food produced near incinerators is shipped to other communities.

The incinerator industry claims that air pollution control devices such as air filters can capture and concentrate some of the pollutants. But, an important factor to be considered is that they do not eliminate these pollutants.

By capturing and concentrating the pollutants, pollutants are transferred to other environmental media such as fly ash, char, slag, and waste water.

Modern pollution control devices such as baghouse filters do not prevent the escape of hazardous emissions such as ultra-fine particles. Ultra-fine particles, or nano-particles, are too small to be effectively captured, and can penetrate deep into the lungs.

Cancer, birth defects, reproductive dysfunction, neurological damage and other health effects are known to occur at very low exposures to many of the metals, organochlorines and other pollutants released by

incineration facilities.

Increased cancer rates, respiratory ailments, reproductive abnormalities and other health effects are noted among people living near some incinerators, according to scientific studies and surveys by community groups.

Emissions limits for incinerators as stipulated in our environmental regulations do not ensure safety. These emissions standards tend not to be based on what is scientifically safe for public health, but on what are determined to be technologically feasible for a given source of pollution.

How do we clearly define a safe level of exposure to cancer-causing pollutants?

Besides this, standards only regulate a handful of the thousands of known pollutants, and do not take into account the exposure to multiple chemicals at the same time. These "synergistic" impacts have countless harmful effects on health and the environment.

In addition, emissions from incinerators are not measured sufficiently and thus overall emissions levels reported can be misleading.

There are many evidences of harmful impacts of incineration but these are being ignored. Incineration also undermines zero waste practices such as recycling and composting, which close the loop on materials efficiency and conserve energy spent on resource extraction and processing.

We urge the Malaysian government to be sensible and invest in zero waste practices. We must divert from dirty waste technologies such as landfilling and incinerating.

It is in the hands of Malaysians to make a choice - consume less and fully partake in zero waste initiatives or be condemned to the impacts of incineration.

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