

Memo / Correction:

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Headline:Landfill a 'green' electricity machine: DeKalb dump turns trash gas to cleaner, yet pricier, power

Subhead:

Reporter:TY TAGAMI

Body Text: When thousands of Georgia residents flick their light switches, the resulting illumination is powered by rotting food scraps and moldering paper in a DeKalb County landfill.

The county is the first government in Georgia to harness the power of landfill gas. Since October, two 20-cylinder engines have been creating electricity by burning methane emitted from the county-owned Seminole Landfill, off River Road, south of I-20. They now consume about two-thirds of the methane emitted from the decomposing garbage, producing 3.2 megawatts per hour.

It's a miniscule amount in comparison with the massive coal-fired plants dotting Georgia, but it's a start for consumers willing to pay extra for "green" energy.

"We're producing enough electricity for about 3,000 homes," said Billy Malone, an assistant director with the county Sanitation Division.

County officials held the official ribbon-cutting earlier this month, the result of two years of effort by county officials to participate in Georgia Power's alternative energy program. The utility has agreed to buy electricity from the county at nearly twice the cost of power from coal. The 10-year agreement should cover the county's \$5 million cost within five years, Malone said. Any profit thereafter will reduce sanitation rates, he said.

This isn't brand-new technology. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has supported landfill gas projects since 1994, and there are about 400 across the country, including facilities at three

commercial trash dumps in Georgia. But DeKalb, and the city of LaGrange, which sells landfill gas rather than burning it, are the only Georgia communities in the garbage-power business.

County Chief Executive Officer Vernon Jones, whose administration began pursuing the contract with Georgia Power in 2004, calls the new facility a gift to the environment.

The two engines emit pollution --- about 23.5 tons of nitrogen oxide a year. But the EPA supports this form of energy because it produces fewer pollutants than other sources, such as coal-fired plants. It also consumes methane waste that otherwise would contribute to global warming.

Gil Turman, a community leader in south DeKalb, said some residents near the landfill initially were concerned about noise from the engines, but he said he hadn't heard any complaints.

Indeed, Michelle Jackson, who is active in her Riverside Estates neighborhood about a mile from the landfill, didn't know the facility was up and running. "I think it's a great step for Georgia in terms of recycling," she said. None of her neighbors has mentioned noise or fumes, she said.

That's a good thing, because this facility could produce electricity for generations to come. Seminole is projected to close in 2071, and the moldering trash should produce gas for three decades thereafter, Malone said.

And that is another major benefit of this kind of energy, he said. "Landfills are a renewable resource --- unless we stop making garbage."

Caption:

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