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Ontario to allow new incinerators

Government says tough new controls will force municipalities to use best technology

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TORONTO — Ontario municipalities will be allowed to burn waste in incinerators, cement plants and lime kilns under provincial environmental guidelines released yesterday.

"There is no scientific or technical reason for banning incineration," Environment Minister Brenda Elliott said in a statement yesterday. "With our guideline, which establishes air emission limits among the toughest in the world, we can be very sure that the environment and human health are well protected."

The rules issued yesterday set the standard that any municipality must meet if it wants to burn its garbage rather than bury it. The previous NDP government banned new incinerators as part of its municipal waste policy.

In last June's provincial election campaign, both the Conservatives and the Liberals argued that incineration technology was safe enough to be considered for use in the province and promised to change the rules to allow municipalities to consider it.

Under the new guidelines, incinerators would be required to use the most advanced incineration and pollution-control technology available and to continuously monitor their gas emissions at the smoke-stack.

Ed Turner, manager of environmental engineering services for the Environment Ministry, said that while some jurisdictions might have a standard for the emission of

individual pollutants that is lower than that of Ontario, the standards the guideline sets are "over all probably the toughest in the world."

He said that when the ministry set standards for each kind of emission from an incinerator, it considered the performance of the best available technology and set its guidelines at levels that only that technology could achieve.

For instance, the standard for the emission of dioxins and furans, one of the most environmentally dangerous type of compounds according to some environmental scientists, is 0.14 parts per trillion.

Even so, NDP environment critic Marilyn Churley said that the government ignored some serious health hazards when it set the guidelines.

She said that many respected scientists, including those at the International Joint Commission, which monitors cross-border environmental hazards in the Great Lakes area, believe that heavy-metal compounds, dioxins and furans build up in animal bodies and do not break down.

These compounds are associated with health problems, and IJC scientists have called for a phasing-out of technology that introduces them into the environment.

While the government has set standards of parts per billion for heavy metals and parts per trillion for dioxins and furans, Ms. Churley said that the operation of an incinerator would lead to "tonnes and tonnes" of these dangerous compounds being blown in-

to the air and building up in the food chain.

Although the government has set rules for the operation of new incinerators, it does not necessarily mean that any will be built. Operators would have to convince municipalities that incinerators are better than land-fill, and then stick-handle a project through the province's approval process.

The new rules don't apply to four existing incinerators burning trash in Hamilton, London, Oshawa and Brampton unless those operations expand or modify their equipment.

The ministry estimates that only about 4 per cent of the province's municipal waste is incinerated, compared with more than 16 per cent in the United States, 50 per cent in Japan and 70 per cent in Sweden. The ban that the NDP introduced in September, 1992, prohibited municipalities only from burning garbage in new incinerators.

Although new incineration plants were banned, the NDP government's regulation amended the Ontario Environmental Protection Act to allow the continued burning of wastes that had no recycling potential, such as animal or medical waste, wood waste and sludge.

The NDP government said its decision to ban new garbage incinerators was based on concerns that they cause air pollution and produce trace amounts of heavy metals and organic contaminants — such as dioxin — that endanger human health.

Moreover, the province argued that incinerators burn materials that should be recycled.

With a report from Gay Abbate