



A worker collects trash near India's Yamuna River to recycle and sell on the local market.

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In India, critics assail proposal to build 100 waste-fueled power plants

By [Gopal Krishna](#) | Jun. 30, 2017, 11:45 AM

An Indian government proposal to build up to 100 incineration plants to burn municipal waste and produce electricity is drawing sharp criticism from opponents, who say the plan flies in the face of the nation's efforts to cut air pollution and shift to cleaner energy sources.

The proposal, part of [a sweeping draft 3-year action plan](#) released this past April by an influential government think tank, is aimed at managing the some 170,000 tons of waste generated each day in some 8000 larger municipalities. Waste-to-energy plants are "the best option" for dealing with this waste, which poses a "serious public health threat," the plan states. It suggests establishing a new Waste to Energy Corporation of India "to speed up the process of cleaning up municipal solid waste" by developing public-private partnerships to build the plants. The corporation could "play a key role in fast-tracking ... waste to energy plants across 100 smart cities by 2019," the report states. The plan envisions the plants, which it suggests would be environmentally beneficial, generating 330 megawatts of electricity by 2018 and 511 megawatts by 2019. (The typical coal-fired power plant generates about 500 megawatts annually.)

But many Indian environmentalists and scientists say [the idea is flawed](#). “Incineration is the worst option possible,” says engineer Anant Trivedi of New Delhi, a former member of the Technical Experts Evaluation Committee of India’s Central Pollution Control Board. “This belief that you are creating clean energy from waste is also wrong.”

He and other critics argue that the recommendation ignores the fact that India’s urban waste streams often contain a mix of materials that is unsuitable for efficient incineration, and that existing plants have had difficulty meeting air quality rules or have closed as a result of poor management and misguided assumptions about fuel streams.

“Incineration is not appropriate,” for managing India’s household waste, which can be 80% organic materials such as damp food scraps, says waste specialist T. V. Ramachandra of the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru. Better options, he says, are composting or using fermenters to convert waste to biogas.

The recommendation to burn waste also seems out of step with other government policies, critics note. A recent Indian government white paper on pollution, for example, states that “thermal treatment methods such as incineration ... are not feasible due to the low heat value of the municipal solid waste.” The critics also argue that India currently has too much capacity for producing electricity, so has little need for waste-fueled power plants.

It’s not yet clear how much of the draft plan, which is supposed to help guide the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will become reality. State and local governments are now commenting on its recommendations, which cover a wide range of issues, including economic, energy, and environmental policy.