

WASTE & RECYCLING NEWS

Landfill gas is 'awesome example of American ingenuity'

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Jim Johnson | WRN senior reporter

Aug. 8 -- If using natural gas to garbage trucks is considered a home run, then using natural gas created by decomposition of trash and other organic waste could be viewed as a grand slam.

For Joanna D. Underwood, the potential for this kind of renewable gas use is huge around the country.

It was not that long ago that folks realized using natural gas could be a terrific step forward, said Underwood, president of Energy Vision, a nonprofit group in New York City concerned with transportation fuels and renewable energy. But the exact path was fuzzy, she remembered.

"The picture that has become much clearer in the last four years is the picture that involves renewable natural gas. And that is really this country's first sustainable fuel. It's renewable. It's the lowest carbon-based fuel in the world," she said.

Harvesting methane from sites such as landfills, waste water treatment plants and farms can help create a supply of domestic transportation fuel, she said. Creating an infrastructure to handle renewable natural gas allows communities and companies alike to better picture its future use.

"That's pretty exciting. Every community, right now, can begin looking at renewable natural gas and the organic waste that they have in their jurisdiction," she said.

"There is no other major option for significantly reducing our dependence on foreign oil right now other than natural gas: conventional natural gas and renewable natural gas," Underwood said.

McNeilus Companies Inc. makes both traditional diesel-powered refuse trucks and CNG-powered vehicles.

Jeffrey Swertfeger, the company's director of marketing and communications, sees more and more interest from solid waste management companies wanting to close the loop between disposal sites and collection operations by using methane created by decaying waste as a transportation fuel.

"We call it the ultimate green machine, when you have a truck that's picking up refuse that's being powered by the methane from the refuse," he said.

"I think that's an awesome example of American ingenuity," he said. "These are the guys who make this country great."

One location he pointed to is Waste Management Inc.'s Altamont landfill in California, where methane gas is converted into liquefied natural gas to run company trucks in nearby markets.

That \$15.5 million project uses about 3,000 cubic feet of landfill gas per minute to create about 13,000 gallons of LNG per day.

"It's easier for cities and communities to envision making the fuel if they already have a way to distribute it," Underwood said. "It can take the place of conventional natural gas. It also can be blended with it. They are chemically just about the same."

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