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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

This is meeting number 41 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. We're continuing our study today on the management of municipal solid waste and industrial materials.

We're honoured today to have Mr. Bob Mills appear by video conference from Calgary, Alberta. Bob is well known in many circles for his work on the environment.

Bob, welcome. You understand the process better than we do. You were a chair of this committee for a lot longer than I was, so welcome. You have a 10-minute opening statement and then we'll have some questions from our members.

Mr. Bob Mills (As an Individual): Great. Thank you very much. This is a new experience for me sitting as a witness, not around the table, but hello to all former colleagues and congratulations for dealing with this issue. It's one I tried as chair and a member of the environment committee to get in the forefront because every single municipality in our country and most other places has this as a problem.

To give a little bit of background, I am 100% opposed to landfills. I think they're ticking time bombs. The liabilities there are tremendous and I began my fight in the early 1970s against landfills.

I used to take my wife on trips to various places. We went to the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Iceland, Denmark, all over the place, and I would always take her out and show her the garbage facilities wherever we happened to be.

The worst was when I took her to Denmark and told her she would get some shopping in. It ended up we went out from 7 a.m. until 9 p. m. and she only had time to window shop.

It has been a long time. I sat next to the mayor of Vienna and after our banquet we went out and looked at a garbage facility, so it has been a long time.

I've always been looking for an alternative. I think that if you're going to oppose something you had better have an alternative that's better. I've looked at different things and looked at incineration in detail. When they started in the 1970s they were a disaster with what they emitted. You have to remember that for incineration you always have about 30% of slag that now becomes toxic and you usually end up landfilling that.

While scrubbers have improved, they still haven't improved enough as your last witness told you, so incinerators are out. They use too low a heat. They don't destroy many of the contaminants.

Denmark has a great incineration program using straw and wood chips, and district heating. Iceland has geothermal and incineration. Berlin has been drying sewage for over 50 years and using it to provide district heating. There are a lot of examples around the world of different types of processes and different types of incinerators.

When I arrived in Ottawa in 1993 I asked my employee, Louise, what the federal government does about garbage. She said, “Well, why don't you call Environment Canada?” I did. They told me it was a provincial matter. I wrote all of the provincial environment ministers and I got an answer back from all of them, surprisingly, and they said that they would really like to look at new technologies, but it's a municipal problem so I should talk to the cities.

I wrote to almost all the major cities in Canada and got a lot of replies. The basic reply was, “We would love to try some new things, but we don't have the money, we don't have the technique, and we don't have the staff that can explore it, so why don't you talk to the province?” Then they said, “Why don't you talk to the feds because that's where you are?” It has been a great circle of nobody wanting to take responsibility.

In the early 1990s I visited Barcelona. Spain had put in a law against landfills, so I thought that's the place I had to go to. I looked, with the help of HERA, the big garbage people there, at the mining process and the piping and so on. I also was told about a problem that they had when they opened up a landfill and a chemical cloud came out. In a landfill you never know what the chemical makeup will be. We like to think that people don't put batteries and stuff like that in there, but of course they do.

Then I discovered there was a new technology that they were looking at. It was called Plasco. I found out it was a Canadian company and then I got involved in looking at what their technology was. The big advantage for them was they were using 5,000°C and producing a slag which then could be used for road material and water and so on. In other words they gasified everything with the plasma. I think you've heard about that technology.

In central Alberta I thought I'd better start at home. I went around to all the councils in our area . This is a bit of a case study here. There were about 200,000 people in that area at that time. They were just instituting a new landfill and I was deadly opposed to that and let everyone know.

Then I approached the Red Deer County. They said that they were on side. We had another 10 municipalities on side. The president of Red Deer College at that time chaired the group. We formed a commission and held public meetings. Where we thought we'd get 50 people, we got 500. There was a huge interest.

● (1535)

As a result of that, a contract was drawn up, but then we ended up going back to councils and we heard what the problems would be: "Well, it might blow up. What if it doesn't work?"

It was going to be all private money, but the City of Red Deer made the decision that it would only put 10% of its garbage in because they had a 17-year investment in the landfill. The province put $10 million in, but the project died, largely because of the City of Red Deer. I could give you a lot more details on that.

You have heard testimony from other witnesses which I've gone through. It has been very interesting. If I were to summarize some of that, I would agree with most of it. Garbage is not a waste; it's a resource. Streamlining and modernizing regulations is certainly necessary. For instance, in the province of Alberta, if you have a BSE animal, you have to put it in a designated landfill. You wouldn't be able to gasify it; you wouldn't be able to do anything else with it. You have to change the regulations to modernize them for the 21st century.

We need more data. We need to know what goes into a landfill. I've been part of a team that has opened garbage bags at various landfills. You would be shocked at what's in there. While people know they shouldn't put batteries in, almost every bag contains a battery or two. Of course, those have all kinds of contaminants which seep out.

We should continue the cycle of reuse and reduce as much as we possibly can. I don't believe we should ever end the green box program. We need to change the way we think—now that's a big one—and those public hearings that I went to, I can answer some of your questions later about those.

We need to consider the real cost of a landfill: the cost to the air, what's being given off and the greenhouse gases in particular, and the cost to the water, the groundwater that we are contaminating. The big thing is the future liability from future landowners with the possibility of—and they're finding this throughout Europe and many parts of the U.S.—leachate seeping into their basements, into their land, making their land literally unsaleable.

Technology will be the solution and that's certainly where the federal, provincial, and municipal governments need to focus. You heard about optical sorters, how the seven plastics can be sorted now without using hands. Incinerators are old technology. They use low temperatures to destroy dioxins and furans. You need at least 1200° C. You have air quality concerns. You have so many things being released. You've heard about that.

I would like to tell you a little story. I drove from Orlando to Miami two weeks ago and there were about five or six landfills by the expressway. You could tell at least a mile before you got to one of the landfills and a mile after you went by. The odour from these capped landfills was just unbelievable.

In conclusion, my recommendations would be that we need much tougher standards. We need municipalities, provinces, and feds to stop saying that it's somebody else's responsibility. We need them to take responsibility, to cooperate, and to encourage the new technologies that are out there.

We need more research and development. We need to encourage all of this new technology; some of it will work, some of it won't. SDTC does a great job. Tax credits and accelerated depreciation are other ways that the federal government could be involved.

The big thing that is out there right now, and that you need to look at, is that there are a great many projects. Many people have many ideas. Unless they've gone through the steps of the engineering, the research, the pilot project, the demonstration plant, then the valley of debt where they actually have to commercialize, until they've gone through those steps, you really don't know if you have a technology that will work or not.

I don't think the federal government needs to be cherry-picking one over the other, but they all need an opportunity to really prove that their system will work. You've heard that from other witnesses as well.

In my opinion, from travelling the world and looking at this, including an in-depth study in China of how they can deal with their garbage, technology will be the solution.

● (1540)

With regard to education, we must let people know there's a huge liability out there, that no engineer will guarantee there won't be seepage of leachate.

Finally, the federal government needs to support and encourage, not necessarily with money, but help all of these new technologies to grow.

Every one of us, every single municipality in this whole country, has a problem with garbage.

I hope that gives you a summary. You can see that I'm kind of passionate about the issue.

The Chair: Absolutely. You're going to have to work on that passion a bit.

We'll move now to our round of questions.

We'll start with the government side, Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thanks a lot, Bob, for being here. I remember talking to you, and I remember your passion about this issue, so it's great to have you in front of committee today.

I remember you talking to me about this gasification and Plasco. I am wondering if you could explain a little more about the difference between the incinerators and the gasification plants.

Mr. Bob Mills: Hi.

I guess the biggest point really is the temperature. I think the very fact that about 99% of everything that is in garbage....

You know, you've recycled and done all that at the front end. You do that no matter what. Whatever is left is what you now put into the gasification process. By using plasma at 4,000 to 6,000°C, you are destroying everything and turning it into its molecular base. It is then recombined into usable materials. In China, the most interesting part is that they see the water as being one of the most useful materials produced by this process.

An important point is that you have 99% of this never getting out again. You have slag, which can be used for road material, and then you can use scrubbers and so on to handle that 1%.

In an incinerator, you have 30% of waste ash that is left after you finish. That can be used—some in concrete, and so on—but it's very concentrated, bad stuff, so that's a big concern. No matter how good the scrubber is, you do have the release of a number of materials. That's documented all over.

I guess that's the big difference between the two processes. It's a matter of not releasing anything and turning it into a valuable product, and you can do that with almost 99% of garbage.

Mr. Colin Carrie: I was going to ask you that.

What are the substrates that are left? I thought some was for gypsum. You could use some things for asphalt. They said it could even be nitrogen for fertilizer. What is left when you gasify things?

● (1545)

Mr. Bob Mills: Well, remember, you have everything broken down into its chemical base, so by the technology that's involved, you can create pretty much what you want. You do produce nitrogen for fertilizer. You produce CO, which can be burned as a gas and can then power our electricity, provide a lot of electricity.

With the slag, which you've removed all of the heavy metals from and sold those metals, you've removed anything that would be a contaminant and turned it into a usable material. I think that's the big thing.

Also, as I said, for the Chinese, water was the big thing for them, that they can get a source of water. Now nobody is recommending in Canada that we would put that into our domestic water stream. I don't think that would sell too well. However, in other places where there's a big shortage of water, you could certainly use it for agriculture and so on.

It's pretty well everything that can be used that comes out of a full gasification plant.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Are there any noted health risks with gasification that you know of?

Mr. Bob Mills: Well, the Ontario government has done a study of projects like Plasco, and there are other ones that are well along in the development stages, some in the U.S. and in Europe. The analysis shows that in many cases the amounts are undetectable.

I was at some hearings in California, and people said that if they're undetectable, why not say it's zero? Well, an engineer will say it's zero today because we can't detect it, that the instruments today will not detect the mercury coming out or the lead or whatever, but maybe sometime in the future, 20 years from now, somebody will develop a technology to identify these nanoparticles.

You could basically say we'll never do anything because there might be something we don't know. You do need the science, but importantly, you need to know what's going into that garbage, and that's where the regulations and restrictions could be much tighter.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Would you be able to share with us some more of the success stories from around the world? Who's doing it best? Who would you say has the best practices if we're looking at a country right now?

Mr. Bob Mills: When I started this, and remember this was in the seventies so it's a long time ago, certainly the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and the Netherlands, but they have been passed by now because the incinerator process was the big deal, and that's what they were perfecting.

I think today you will find a whole bunch...you've heard from witnesses about some plants that are using all kinds of new technologies. I think Canada could easily be a leader and the export potential of that leadership, whether it's Plasco or Enerkem, or whoever it is, if they perfect that technology, the saleability of it to countries like India, China, and Brazil is just tremendous.

The Danes developed the windmill and perfected that and then they made big profits for their country in jobs. I think we could do the same with garbage if we just put our minds to it, but you do need to give provinces and municipalities the confidence that the federal government wants to find a solution. That was lacking in my little case study here in Red Deer in central Alberta. We didn't have strong support. We had no negatives, but no strong support positively to make this happen, so municipalities and provinces didn't have the confidence to go ahead with some of this new technology.

The fear of change is what's so critical here. Everybody says that if we do it like grandpa did it, at least we know what's going to happen. We have to go further than that.

Sorry for the long answer.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carrie. Your time is up.

I will move now to Mr. Bevington for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Northwest Territories, NDP): Mr. Mills, it's nice to see you again. We remember you from your time here.

You didn't talk much about the U.S. and what they do there and how they deal.... It is the second largest economy in the world, close to the first still. What are they doing that we could pick up on?

● (1550)

Mr. Bob Mills: If you were to look at U.S. examples—I mentioned the one in Florida and I've been to the ones in New York and Michigan—they're landfilling. They claim they have liners that don't leak, but no engineer will guarantee that. I would say for the most part it's either incinerating or landfilling.

General Electric and Westinghouse have been working with new technologies, but they're really on a very backward scale as far as I'm concerned. I think we could become the leaders here and sell them a lot of this technology.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Yes, if they're not there, perhaps we can get there. Is that your point of view?

Mr. Bob Mills: I think so, yes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Have you examined federal funding for these types of projects? How does it fit in with other countries? Are we providing proper support to make this type of garbage revolution possible, or are we content to leave it in the hands of the provinces?

Mr. Bob Mills: That's passing the buck. The municipalities don't have the money. They're stretched as far as they can go, so they can't do anything. The provinces have other priorities, health care and so on, so I don't think there's enough funding out there.

You can get a lot of private funding. SDTC does a good job with a limited amount of funding. Funds like the carbon tax in Alberta have quite a lot of money that they put into new technologies. A bit is being done, but there could be much more if we want to be world leaders.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Have those funds you're talking about participated in any of the development of these new technologies?

Mr. Bob Mills: I know they have with Plasco, and I know in Alberta they have with other projects like composting, so I would say yes, but I don't think you'd find any entrepreneur who would say it's enough. More than that, it's the physical support. The feds are behind in finding a solution. I think that's the moral we have to have, and we don't have that.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Say you were going to burn garbage to produce electricity, what would the profile be in comparison to, say, coal?

Mr. Bob Mills: Again, incineration is not the way to go. Even with modern scrubbers, incineration will pretty much give you the same problems as coal in terms of greenhouse gases, in terms of carcinogenic emissions, dioxins and furans. Again, they're just too low a temperature. You need a high temperature and you need to capture everything. That's the technology that is going to dominate, and unfortunately, or fortunately, the Chinese are really working on that, and I firmly believe—again I've been going to China since 1979—that environmentally 15 years out they are going to become leaders if we don't in this area of garbage.

That's hard to believe but I really believe it.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: If you're gasifying and you're using the gas to produce something, perhaps electricity, perhaps just simply heat, what's the comparison with the other energy forms right now? Would a carbon tax make the difference there to gasification to bring it on stream quicker to make the economics look better? Of course, garbage has to be a lower.... If you're avoiding landfill, you're avoiding some of the issues that come with methane and those other products in a landfill. What would you say would be required to make gasification producing electricity economically comparable to other forms of energy production?

● (1555)

Mr. Bob Mills: At first it's going to be more expensive; I don't think there's any question about that. But you have to think about the whole package: what you're doing to your air, what you're doing to your groundwater, what you're doing to future generations, and the liability question. I think when you put all that package together and you think of the cost of it, and the cost of the carbon, I think you have a reason to say, "Let's get a new technology that releases nothing". Biogas is basically a lot cleaner than using gasoline, or diesel, or whatever. I think you'd solve your greenhouse gas problem by refining—and that's really what it's all about—refining that garbage into a usable material, a biogas or an energy producer, electricity producer.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Are you familiar with the process that they developed in Borlänge, Sweden? They sort the garbage very carefully and then they use sensors to detect anything that slips into their stream in order to provide that assurance that what they're burning is free of products that can create those hazardous components.

Mr. Bob Mills: It's heavy metals, and dioxins and furans, and so on that you can't detect, that you can't get out of that burning stream, that incineration stream. Above all, no matter what we do and whatever method we end up with, we must sort at the front end. Wherever it's financially feasible to take a plastic and turn it into something of value, we should do it. Metal, whatever, we should always sort fully. The new technologies that are coming forward are going to make that a lot easier. You need to sort it at the front end and recycle where you can, but there's always going to be something left, and that something that's left is what's dangerous and what we need to be able to refine.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Sopuck for seven minutes please.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): I don't know if you recall, Bob, but you and I served on a panel at the Manning Centre a few years ago, along with Michelle Rempel. It was great fun and I greatly admire the work that you do.

You talked a fair bit about research and development needs that perhaps the federal government could be involved in. At least I think you were inferring that. Can you elaborate in some detail on what you see as the research and development needs to expand the use of this technology?

Mr. Bob Mills: First of all, to start at the front end, is the sorting process. That needs new technologies. There are all kinds of inventors out there. We're pretty good at that. I think we need encouragement and funding to help that out.

Then I think there's the process itself. We need to refine that process. I mentioned the valley of death. When you have something, you have a test plant, it's working. Now it's working, and you've fixed the bugs in it. That takes 10 years. Now you go into actually commercializing it. Who is going to buy this? That's where your big problem comes in.

Anything we can do to help what are basically small businesses to get from that invention stage to developing test plants, to building a prototype, and then to the commercialization.... A lot of that is salesmanship. A lot of that is going out to various governments in different places. All of that takes support and cash. Anything we can do to help them with writing down some of their costs in invention, anything we can do there in a tax....

I don't like just handing out money, because so much of that is just a waste. I think SDTC does a good job of vetting, following, and reporting, but they have a limited amount of money to do that with. There's where we could put more in. That's a federal project.

I think, as well, the federal government needs to provide the leadership. They need to tell the provinces and the municipalities, “Hey, we're behind your going into new projects to get this whole thing going.”

As I mentioned, I'm most familiar with the Alberta carbon program, where there's a fair amount of money put in for companies that put out too much carbon, and they pay a penalty: $15 a tonne. That fund is growing rapidly and is being used for environmental projects.

● (1600)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: A lot of what you just described relates to marketing, communication, leadership, and so on. Can we infer, then, that the actual technology is basically there for gasification?

Mr. Bob Mills: I would say yes, it's there, and I would say there are a few leaders. There are a great many people who think they know the technology, but they haven't gone through the steps. Until you get a plant that's up and running, and as I said, that can take 10 years or more, you really don't know what you have. It's great on paper sometimes.

There are probably at least a hundred companies out there that have an idea. I couldn't believe how many there were. But you have to go through the steps. That's where the government could come in and provide the initiatives.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: You mentioned, regarding the residue from gasification, that the material could be used in roads and road building. What other uses are there for the residue from the incineration process?

Mr. Bob Mills: Remember, first of all, you have to take out the heavy metals. You have to take out anything that's a contaminant. The high temperature will destroy the dioxins and furans, the bad stuff, but then you end up with.... I just brought a piece of my favourite slag. The poor people who served with me probably saw me hanging around with this slag all the time. I have a ring made out of this slag. It's hard stuff.

This can be ground up and used in road crush. It can also be used in ornaments. It can be used in road curbing. It can be used in any number of things. The most important thing is that when you analyze that, it's cleaner than a Coke bottle in terms of what's in there. That's a usable material.

The other things you get out of there are fertilizers. You take the nitrogen, recombine it, and produce fertilizer. The phosphorus, you can take that out. In terms of the water, you can take that out. You have all these usable materials that now are saleable products. The heavy metals are saleable. Everything that you take out of that garbage is now saleable. That makes it a resource, not a cost.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Again, you're inferring or implying that economics are not the problem here, that this is financially feasible. Is that the case in every situation? Is it just obstreperousness on the part of municipalities that this is not being done, or are there cases where this simply just does not work financially?

Mr. Bob Mills: When you talk to municipalities, it's very fascinating. I've talked to many. They come up with the strangest reasons for not doing this. I have turned that into a presentation I call the fear of change. Why are bureaucrats afraid of it? Why are politicians afraid of it? Why is the public afraid of it? To summarize, basically the bureaucrat is afraid to recommend this because he'll lose his job if it doesn't work. A politician is afraid to do it because he might not get elected if he promotes a lemon and, of course, the public for the most part don't understand and can easily become frightened by some new approach. As a result we stay with the same old way of doing things.

I guarantee that landfills are ticking time bombs and will come back to haunt us in Canada. We're very young, but in older places such as Europe, they are a nightmare to deal with. The cost is beyond all. You can't imagine what some municipalities are being sued for.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

We'll move now to Mr. McKay for seven minutes.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Hi, Bob, John McKay here. It's good to see you again.

Mr. Bob Mills: Hi, John.

Hon. John McKay: You're a poster child for post-retirement MPs.

Mr. Bob Mills: Hey, I'm still fighting garbage so, you know, it's 40 years later.

Hon. John McKay: Yes. Old MPs don't die, they simply recycle themselves, is that what you're saying?

Mr. Bob Mills: That's exactly right, yes. You don't want to turn into slag or something.

Hon. John McKay: Well, there's a lot of slagging that goes on here, there's no question about that.

● (1605)

Mr. Bob Mills: We'll get into that after.

Hon. John McKay: I was thinking about what you were saying and thinking about the front-end sorting. It seems to me that if I look at how we've kind of gone through the three Rs and in a certain way kind of adapted to it, we actually haven't gone back to the front end and looked at how products could be sorted in a better way, re-streamed and redirected, shall we say.

I was wondering whether you could comment first from the standpoint of the householder putting the product on the curb, if you will, and then from the standpoint of whoever picks it up to direct or redirect it.

Mr. Bob Mills: Well, I would like to think that people treat garbage the way people should treat garbage, in other words, sort it and so on. The sad part, what brought me back to reality on that whole thing, is when I opened garbage bags. If you want an experience, go to a landfill and open 25 garbage bags and see what you find inside.

Hon. John McKay: I'll pass on that thanks.

Mr. Bob Mills: It's amazing. It's a fairly smelly job, but you'd really be interested in what you find. I mean, we even found a chopped up bicycle in a garbage bag. There's a huge amount of stuff that isn't recycled properly. The technology is there. Rip open the bag, sort out the metal, sort out the batteries, discover anything that can be recycled. Again it comes down to the cost of that. As the technology develops, the cost gets lower and lower, but you have to develop that technology. As I said, I believe it's out there. I think that has already been invented. But you still have stuff that you have to deal with.

Composting is one thing for some of it, but now you get into what about the air, what about the soil, so it seems to me that keeping that garbage out of the ground is the only way you're going to deal with it. I believe it can be done economically and I think there's money to be made from garbage. Countries are proving that. The companies are proving that. But you have to get the plants built.

We've done a lot of talk. I can't even count how many public hearings I've been at about garbage, from the 1970s and on. There's a lot of talk, but not many people are taking much action. We take another piece of land and have all the hearings, then it goes ahead and we bury it.

Hon. John McKay: I was standing in my driveway a week or so ago—we live in a cul-de-sac—watching this guy in a pickup truck come down our street looking for stuff out on the curb. I was kind of surprised when he stopped and picked up some stuff and threw it in the back of his truck. I was thinking about that as getting greater access on the part of the private entrepreneurs to the value that is in garbage and whether there is a way in which they can access the materials so it can be recycled more directly into more valuable products.

Mr. Bob Mills: Third world countries have hundreds of people who hang out at landfills and pick garbage. They are obviously picking out what's of value.

I visited a cardboard plant in Nova Scotia. They used to get $50 per tonne for cardboard. Today, the price is running up to $250, $300, $500 for a tonne of cardboard. The prices are going up for these commodities, and of course, most of it's being shipped to Asia, China, Korea, and various other places. Things are increasing in value.

I don't know about the guy driving around in cul-de-sacs picking it up, whether that's the answer. I think more it's an answer of opening those bags and having the technology to sort it there. Then what you can't use, what is not economical to recycle, you do something else with it, but don't put it in a landfill. The problem with the incinerator is that into the air, into the landfill, you end up producing a more toxic situation.

● (1610)

Hon. John McKay: The final question has to do with the $15 per tonne in Alberta for GHG emissions. I was kind of surprised that this kind of fund could be used for, if you will, dealing with waste products or dealing with garbage and recycling. I didn't realize there was access to that kind of fund for that. I thought it was supposed to be directed to reducing GHG emissions for the oil and gas industry.

Mr. Bob Mills: New technologies reduce the GHGs into the.... Because a landfill is releasing all kinds—

Hon. John McKay: One of the emissions of GHGs—

Mr. Bob Mills: —of greenhouse gases. That's where it is justified. Yes, there are a number of projects, from composting of manure to things like Plasco, where money has been offered through that carbon fund.

The Chair: Mr. Mills, I want to take 20 seconds to ask a question.

You indicated that the slag has fewer contaminants left in it than a Coke bottle. Does that apply to a full Coke bottle as well?

Mr. Bob Mills: Hey, I don't want to get into that; I don't need a lawsuit. That's a medical issue and we'd need to ask a doctor.

The Chair: We'll move now to Monsieur Choquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Mills, for being with us today.

I agree with you that garbage is not a waste but, rather, a resource we should be reusing. We need to find a way to repurpose that garbage. The cradle-to-cradle principle dictates that waste be reused. That is the best approach.

I wasn't sure why we were studying this issue, and I will admit I am still wondering about that. Nevertheless, I listened when witnesses said that Canada had the worst scorecard when it came to municipal waste management, which made me think there was probably a good reason for doing this study. I hope we'll come out of it with some useful recommendations.

A number of witnesses have stressed the importance of establishing a carbon tax based on the polluter pays principle. And you've talked about that as well today. As you know, Alberta and British Columbia have a carbon tax. Quebec has a cap and trade system in place with California. Ontario is even considering adopting that system.

Regardless of the approach taken, where do you stand on the importance of establishing a carbon tax based on the polluter pays principle?

[*English*]

Mr. Bob Mills: I think that's the point I would really want to make, that there is a cost but there's a huge benefit from recycling. Obviously, some of these new technologies at least initially need some help, need some funding in various ways to make them succeed. I used to be extremely opposed to a carbon tax but I do believe we have to put a value on the carbon that we're putting into our environment. Climate change is real. It's happening at an accelerated rate, and we as developed countries need to deal with that. We need to take into account the value or the cost of that carbon going into the atmosphere, so somehow we have to find a way to fund projects, new technologies.

In Alberta, as I've mentioned, that's what's happening with that $15. I think that's a great use of that $15, to help these new technologies. I'd like to see the whole world do it. The biggest problem I guess with the carbon, the whole cap and trade thing, has been in Europe where they issued way too many certificates and way too many loopholes, and as a result, the price of carbon has dropped to almost nothing. When I was sitting in your chair there, I would have been predicting that the price of carbon would now be $80. Instead it's like $2. The reason for that is largely the mismanagement from Brussels of that whole carbon tax thing.

● (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

You are right. The system clearly has to be managed properly and seriously. I'm glad to hear you talk about the importance of taking action against climate change.

In fact, the committee will be debating some motions I provided notice of last week. One of them pertains to the official opposition's absence from the delegation Canada is sending to the United Nations Climate Change Conference taking place in Lima. That is truly disgraceful, in my view. The other motion has to do with the fact that the minister is unfortunately not going to appear before the committee to share Canada's position during the upcoming negotiations in Lima.

I have very little time left, but I'd like you to repeat your main recommendations for the federal government. I want to make sure the Library of Parliament analysts fully understood.

[*English*]

Mr. Bob Mills: Again, I was so pleased to be asked to come before the committee on this subject, particularly because I've tried to get it raised so many times. I think it's really important. I think it's something that every province and every municipality in every province has a problem with. You can't keep doing it the way you've been doing it. You have to change that.

The fact is there are solutions out there, and we can sit here and say, “Okay, here are some of the answers.” I've gone through all of the testimony that came before, and there are some great recommendations there. If those are put down in point form, I would hope that the federal government would take that seriously and provide that vision—I love that word “vision”—leadership on 21st century technologies instead of the way grandpa and great-grandpa did it. That's not good enough anymore.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

We'll move now to Mr. Toet for five minutes.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Mr. Mills, it has been very interesting to hear your perspectives on this after, as you say, many years of looking at this issue.

You mentioned that we must sort at the front end. I think it's key. Mr. McKay talked about this a little bit. Where do you see that front end when it comes to sorting occurring? We've heard from different witnesses. Some will see that front end as being at the household before it gets to the curb. Some will see that sorting at different points. Where would you define that front end from your perspective?

Mr. Bob Mills: I think if everybody sorted at the curb, that would be wonderful. The problem is that a lot of people don't, and I challenge you again to go and open 25 garbage bags. Obviously, it has to be at where the collection point is. In other words, I think the plant that it's taken to is where your major sorting is going to occur. The more you can do at the curb, in the house, the better; that will help a lot, but I don't believe that you can count on that for 100% of your sorting. It would be nice to think that everybody cared and that everybody would sort diligently, but unfortunately I'm now convinced that it won't happen.

I would say keep what we've got, but let's move on to technology to sort at the front end at the plant.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Okay. So you would be very supportive of technology such as Emterra's. In your introductory remarks you actually mentioned the optical sorters that can sort different plastics. They don't even have to be labelled as to which type of plastic they are. That becomes a redundant issue.

Mr. Bob Mills: Right. We didn't used to have that.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: I know. That's new technology.

One reason I bring that up is that ultimately, to a large degree for us to go forward on this issue, municipalities have to embrace the change, because they're the ones that have to deliver the service. They also have to embrace the different ways of delivering the service.

I bring this up because you cited the example of Red Deer and their 17-year commitment to their landfill, and how they wanted to divert only 10% of their waste. We haven't called witnesses here from some jurisdictions that I had also talked about. We do all our sorting at the curb. We have the household do it. We don't want to have to invest in optical readers in order to do the sorting work. You talked about the psychological support being almost more important than the financial support to some degree in these municipalities.

Given your experience, can you give us a recommendation, an idea or a thought about how we can bring that forward to the municipalities so that they will actually want to embrace changes in technology rather than, as you say, do it the same way their father and grandfather did it, so that they will want to look at the new ways of doing these things?

● (1620)

Mr. Bob Mills: I tried this little experiment in the Netherlands, because they were looking for new technology. They can't landfill efficiently anymore, because they're short of land and they have a high water table, etc. They had a 50-year contract for an incinerator and they weren't sure how they could get out of that. In order to not landfill, they're taking out very contaminated slag and hauling it to one of the eastern European countries and landfilling it there rather than in their own country. To me that is really offloading your time bomb to somebody else.

We need to do a sales job. I think the FCM is a good place to start. You have all of the mayors there. That's a place where this vision can be put together. We must not landfill anymore. We must come up with some of these new technologies. I think with that kind of encouragement from the federal government and hopefully down to the provincial government, municipalities will embrace it. They want to, but they don't have the ability and the finances to actually do the Death Valley thing. There's where the feds come in. They have vision. I think this committee can do that, can provide that vision. Then, of course, you have to convince the minister and the Prime Minister that this is the way to go, because everybody wants a solution to their garbage problem.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: I find that very interesting. There's a little town about 60 miles east of Winnipeg, the very small municipality of Whitemouth, which has probably one of the most state-of-the-art waste disposal sites where they do a lot of this front-end sorting. This is a very small municipality with not a whole lot of resources. Actually to some degree it's a municipality that's lost a lot of its young people who used to be in the peat business. The peat business has been going downhill for them, and yet they found the resources to do this on their own and they're actually doing it very efficiently. Again, I think we need to look at examples of that. How is a small municipality like this, which is not getting provincial money and not getting federal money, actually being a beacon of hope out there for municipalities that really want to embrace this technology and do it in an efficient manner?

The Chair: Could we have a short answer to that if it's possible?

Mr. Bob Mills: That's where the sales come in. That's where we take examples. We take early adapters of other forms of handling garbage. We have an early adapter there, and there will be only a handful of municipalities in that category. Most of them are waiting to see what happens. They're not going to be early adapters. Take those early adapters and use them as poster municipalities and say, “Look what they have done. Here's what you should be doing”. That's what I mean by vision and encouragement. That is what hasn't existed out of Ottawa or out of a number of the provinces.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bob Mills: Remember my letters back from the provinces and the municipalities? I got a lot of letters.

The Chair: Okay, and all that extra paper contributed to our pollution as well.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bob Mills: Yes, but we recycled all the paper.

The Chair: We'll move back to Mr. Bevington for five minutes, please.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Mills, you talked about the FCM. I sat on the FCM green fund, which you're probably familiar with, for about five years.

● (1625)

Mr. Bob Mills: Yes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: We did a lot of innovative work a decade ago and that was great. The municipalities wanted to participate in the green fund because we had the ability to pay down the interest rate a little bit. That technique is gone now because of low interest rates. The green fund, talking to people about it now and about its.... This is a fund that has probably most of that information collected within it. It has done all measures of feasibility studies on all techniques for municipalities on waste disposal, on renewable energy, on clean water, sewers, all those things, but it's stalled right now because it doesn't have any financial incentive built into its system to encourage municipalities to do these things.

The idea of the green fund was, of course, that by municipalities accepting a green portfolio on the work that they're doing they would get a preferred interest rate. Their feasibility would be covered. Now there's nothing there anymore. That's a sad fact right now. Do you think we need a new fund to generate interest among municipalities to do the right thing?

We were moving in that direction, but it's not there at the FCM right now.

Mr. Bob Mills: To answer that, again I'm most familiar with my own community, but if I look at a newspaper article here from November 20, it's about the landfill in Red Deer. Part of their business plan is to be very green, but they're bragging about their garbage facility. It's not modern. It's old. They need the guidance of the FCM, the province, and the feds to actually realize what it really means to recycle all of our garbage, to not have a landfill anymore.

It just makes me see red when I see someone bragging about how green they are, because it's all talk. It's not really doing the thing.

I've been to some FCM meetings and so on and have heard the talk, but it's the action that really counts. That's where we need these early adapters and this is where the feds could come in a lot, and the provinces, and as the other gentleman mentioned, encourage those places and present them as poster places of how these guys did something.

I think once we did that, this thing would take off. I think your entrepreneurs and companies would jump into that too, because they see dollars to be made.

A municipality also has to know they can make money from their garbage. There has to be a shared income as part of any contract with any company. That would be a necessity, because then there's an incentive to be part of it and build the thing.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Thank you very much.

Are you still running your house on renewable energy, or have you moved to something else?

Mr. Bob Mills: Yes. I have 28 solar panels and 60 solar tubes and I'm planning to put up another bank of 100 solar panels, but the government might not let me sell that much green energy into the grid, so I'll have to fight that too.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Keep up the good fight.

The Chair: We have a few minutes, possibly three to four minutes for Mrs. Ambler and then we're going to end this part of the meeting.

Mrs. Ambler.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you very much, Bob, for coming to talk with us today and for your terrific presentation.

I'm the one at the family picnic who goes through the garbage bags and takes out the glass bottles and the plastic bottles, so I totally get where you're coming from. I really appreciate the work that you do, because it hurts me to put something like that in the garbage knowing that it's going to go to a landfill.

I was concerned and disappointed when I heard about all the passing of the buck among levels of government that you faced when you first got involved with this issue and tried to find out more about it. I'm wondering, this is a vast country, there must be some municipalities and regions that are doing good things and that can be held up as examples for others. Do you know of any? Can you tell us about those?

Mr. Bob Mills: I guess Edmonton would like to think that they are at the front end of this, because they have taken some action and not just talked about it. They haven't quite gone far enough to get rid of all of that material and they still have part of a landfill.

I was interested in the gentleman who presented to you about how P.E.I. has closed 34 of its 35 landfills. That has to be a huge achievement. I don't know a lot about it, but that would be something to follow up on as well.

There are leaders in Germany. There are cities like Berlin, for instance, that have really moved forward in terms of what is an alternative. Their water table is very high. They can't put garbage very deep, and so it becomes a necessity to find another way.

The Netherlands, as I mentioned, haul it to eastern Europe. That's not an answer. That's the worst answer.

In terms of Canada, I would say we've moved quite a long way. I don't want to make it sound like we are really back in great grandpa's age because we do have blue boxes and we do recycle way more than we ever did before, but we have to go a lot farther. We have to end—100% end—all landfilling in Canada. That has to be the goal.

Okay, so what are you going to do with that garbage? Well, that garbage has a value and that's the major point. We need to put that out to industry and say to them that there's money to be made here. I am familiar with China and some of the cities there that are doing things. They are developing new technologies. They will be selling it if we don't get on the bandwagon.

● (1630)

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Speaking of landfills, looking way into the future now and into the landfills that we can't deny exist all across the country in all of our neighbourhoods and communities, can anything be done to remediate these sites so many years later? Is there any technology out there or have you seen or heard of any promising technologies to kind of...? I guess I'm talking more now about going back in time.

Maybe we should not bother, because maybe there are no hazards or toxin risks associated with these existing landfills anymore; I don't know. Should we just leave them alone?

Mr. Bob Mills: Let me go back to Barcelona and some of the other Spanish examples where they have actually outlawed landfills and have actually said you must recycle all of your old landfills.

The problem is that when they take the cap off, now they have a chemical cocktail and they have no idea what they're dealing with. In one case it created a plume of dangerous gas, which killed the cap operator that opened it. They had to evacuate a whole community because of this toxic gas. They didn't know that was going to happen. So you don't know what's in there. And remember: the old landfills had no liners. Those are leaking and seeping into adjacent land. We have a huge liability out there.

In the case of our landfills, if a landfill is up to about 10 years old, I'm told that it still has enough energy value in it to be recycled. You could dig up an eight- or ten-year-old landfill and turn it into value. Anything older than that and you have such a mix of chemicals and a loss of energy that it might not be economical. But maybe you have to do it anyway.

In the case of Spain, what they've done is drilled holes and put gas collectors in. They collect liquid and gas, and then they treat it to try to decontaminate it. Those pipes are like three feet apart and there are hundreds of miles of pipe throughout that landfill. It's a very costly process.

Should we be dealing with it? Yes, but let's deal with the new garbage first.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you very much, Mr. Mills, for taking the time to be present today and for your answers to the questions of our members. We appreciate your sharing your expertise with us.

We'll have a three-minute recess and we'll reconvene in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]