



Xcel Energy's Wilmarth power plant burns trash. Sounds like a good idea, but not everyone agrees with the practice  
Courtesy Blue Earth County.

# A messy history

A look at solid waste in Mankato and where it's at today

By Natalie Rademacher

**M**ost garbage goes into a bin and then gets picked up by local waste haulers. Recyclables go into a separate curbside bin that is also picked up. Organic material such as food scraps can be brought to a drop-off site.

This is the part of the waste stream visible to consumers, but many may not know what happens to these materials after this step.

The waste management systems in place today, while an integral part of society, haven't been around for very long. The systems have come a long way in the last several decades and advocates say there is still much to be done to reduce waste and keep it out of landfills.

## A history of waste

The history of waste management is a messy one. All kinds of waste were deposited at open dump sites in the 1940s. People would scrounge at these sites for reusable items.

Other people dumped cans, bottles, even cars and washing machines along riverbanks. While this practice hasn't been commonplace in decades, many of these dump sites are littered on riverbanks throughout the region today.

Brand Frenz, who died in 2019, told Minnesota Public Radio News he mapped more than 200 miles of rivers in the Mankato area and found there is an average of one abandoned dump site every mile.

As the state's population continued to grow in the

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1950s and '60s, the garbage kept piling up. This put pressure on the state to find new ways to contain solid waste.

Welcome to the era of closed landfills.

Open dumps were closed and sanitary landfills — which use covers, linings and pipes to keep the waste out of the environment — were established throughout Minnesota in the 1970s. These landfills provided a better way to prevent waste from seeping into the ground and waterways.

Around this time, the state was looking for ways to reduce how much waste was ending up in these landfills. Legislation was enacted in 1973 that gave the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency authority to promote waste reduction, recycling and resource recovery.

One way to slow the filling of landfills was the establishment of resource recovery facilities in the 1980s, including the Wilmarth plant in Mankato.

Rather than garbage going directly to the landfill, it could be incinerated and used to generate electricity.

Recycling programs also were mandated in Minnesota counties in 1989, and recycling facilities were built in North Mankato and Mankato in the early '90s.

More items began ending up in the recycling bin — about 15% of waste in the state was recycled at the beginning of the decade. By 2000, about 30% of generated waste was recycled, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's SCORE Report, which tracks waste management.

Industrial composting still would not be established in the area for a while. The Full Circle Organics Composting Facility opened in Good Thunder in 2014, and Mankato Area Public Schools began bringing cafeteria food scraps to the facility around that time.

Mankato Zero Waste, a group of local advocates, saw the new facility as an opportunity to divert even more waste from the landfill.

The group went to the Mankato City Council in 2015 and got permission to do a one-year pilot study of a program where households could bring their compostable items, like food scraps, to a weekly drop-off site at the Lamm Street bus facility.

"We saw food waste as one of the



Mankato Zero Waste volunteer Betty Winkworth guides a local resident through the process of organics recycling on the first day of a organics drop-off service in 2015. Free Press Media file photo.

most critical ways to reduce emissions because of the methane produced by food in landfills," said Betty Winkworth of Mankato Zero Waste.

The program was a success and there are now drop-off compost bins in Mankato, North Mankato and Lake Crystal. Today there are 1,300 households that bring their compost to a local drop site. There are also 42 cities with organics recycling programs throughout the state.

These systems were put in place to divert material from ending up in landfills, but there is still much that ends up there today.

### Following the trash

So what happens between when a local hauler picks up a resident's waste and when it ends up in the landfill?

A unique part about Mankato's waste is that it stays local throughout the process.

Imagine a to-go coffee cup. To dispose of the cup, it needs to be put in the garbage stream because the plastic film on the cup makes it non-recyclable. The cup, crammed into a trash bag along with other household solid waste, is moved

from the kitchen garbage to the large bin for pickup day.

A Waste Management truck dumps the bag into the truck along with the rest of the neighborhood's waste.

The cup doesn't have to travel far before it arrives at its next destination — a place where it will be combined with tons of other solid waste from the Twin Cities and around the region.

At the Minnesota Waste Processing Company on Summit Avenue, the cup is shredded, dried and baled, along with the other waste and turned into material called refuse-derived fuel or RDF. It is then fed through a tunnel to the neighboring Wilmarth power plant for the next stage. There the material is burned at about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Xcel Energy, which owns and operates the plant, then gets the energy that is produced. People who get their electricity from Xcel may be using energy generated by local waste. The Wilmarth plant can produce enough electricity to power 2,000 homes, said Bill Goebel, waste management specialist in Blue Earth County.

All that remains of the cup now is

the leftover ash. The ash is collected and sent to the Ponderosa Landfill a couple of miles outside of Mankato where it is dumped into a separate landfill dedicated to ash.

The waste-to-energy model, also called resource recovery, is meant to be a way to keep garbage out of the landfill. Even though the ash ultimately ends up there, when the waste is burned, it is reduced in size by about 85-90%, greatly reducing how much space is needed at Ponderosa.

"When you look at the big picture, it's a neat process of stuff that would just be wasted," Goebel said.

### Under heat

The Wilmarth plant has faced criticism since before it opened. Environmentalists at the time opposed it because of the ash ending up in the landfill. The county uses double lining to keep the ash from getting into the environment.

Today there is pushback because of the greenhouse gases emitted by the incinerator and because it's a system that relies on the production of more waste.

"The problem with incinerators is that they incentivize making waste,"

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Winkworth said. "The other issue is the ash it produces has toxins. While there are filters to catch these toxins, they aren't able to capture all of them."

Incinerators release dioxin, lead, mercury, carbon dioxide and other pollutive greenhouse gas emissions, but the county has invested heavily in filters and other systems to capture as much of the gases as they can before it gets into the atmosphere.

Dave Kronlokken, waste and recycling supervisor for Blue Earth County, said studies show burning waste in an incinerator is more favorable from a greenhouse gas perspective than landfilling. He said that's because waste breaks down in a landfill and generates methane, which warms the atmosphere much more quickly than carbon dioxide.

### Diverting

The waste hierarchy is an inverted pyramid, with reusing and reduction at the top and treatment and disposal, such as landfills, at the bottom. Even though most local garbage is incinerated, some is still brought to landfills.

"Landfills - we recognize they are

critical because there are some things that just can't go anywhere else," Goebel said. "But in general, we try to do everything we can to keep things from ending up in the landfill."

County staff works to find ways to keep certain items, such as mattresses, from ending up in the ground. They established a mattress-recycling program with a local company to take and reuse these materials. They also try to take car batteries, scrap metals and recyclables out of the waste stream so they can be properly recycled.

Education is one of the biggest components of the work. They try to teach the community about what shouldn't end up in the solid waste stream and how to properly dispose of it.

Jane Dow and Winkworth of Mankato Zero Waste say they hope local organics recycling continues to expand as a way to divert compostable waste. They said many residents would like to see curbside pickup available for compost material. Participating households now have to bring their compostable material to a drop-off site.

Another area they are interested in is establishing a commercial program that incentivizes businesses to recycle their organic material because so much compostable waste is generated by places such as restaurants.

To get the program to this scale, they say the cities need to be on board.

"We can propose ideas, but it has to be seen as a priority that will take city commitment to form policies, educate the community and some staff time," Winkworth said.

As the history of waste has shown, where waste ends up has changed drastically in the last 50 years and continues to evolve today.

Experts say that while we have found other ways to divert waste, the focus instead should shift to reducing waste in the first place.

Dow said she wants more pressure put on companies to produce less plastic and single-use waste. She said it's been the responsibility of communities to find ways to recycle and compost these materials while companies continue producing more single-use



Jane Dow

waste.

"I think there's an awareness about needing to produce less waste," Dow said. "But there's still such a large production of material. Landfills are as happy as ever."  
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