

Mr. Christopher Clark  
89 Bellwood Ave.  
West Seneca, NY 14224

Dear Mr. Clark:

Thank you for your letter of January 8, 1999 to President Clinton in which you shared your concerns about pollution problems that our nation faces, especially with regard to managing our solid waste. The President referred your letter to me for reply.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has worked diligently with state and local governments, private industry, and the general public to reduce the environmental impact of the solid waste that is generated as a part of our everyday life. We support an integrated hierarchy for managing solid waste that has source reduction as its first and preferred waste management option. Source reduction strives to reduce the amount and toxicity of waste before it is generated. An example of source reduction is designing and manufacturing products and packaging with the lowest possible volume and toxicity. Citizens can also practice source reduction by selecting products that produce less waste and by finding ways to reuse materials rather than simply discarding them. I am enclosing a publication entitled The Consumer's Handbook for Reducing Solid Waste that contains more information on what people like you can do to help reduce waste generation.

The second option in the hierarchy is recycling. Recycling further reduces the amount of waste that must be landfilled or burned in an incinerator. In 1989, we established a national goal to recycle 25 percent of our nation's waste stream. In response to the leadership displayed by this national goal, more than 40 states set their own goals (many of which were mandatory) ranging from 20 to 50 percent. As a result of these and other efforts, our national recycling rate now exceeds 28 percent. In 1997, more than 60 million tons of waste was recovered through recycling. The U.S. recovered more waste than the entire waste generation in Japan. We are now working to raise our national recycling rate to 35 percent. If we are going to be successful in reaching this goal, we will need the population's full support of their local recycling programs, which includes seeking out and purchasing products made with recycled materials. Composting of organic materials, such as food and yard waste, also plays a key role in diverting waste from disposal facilities.

RO 14353

The third option is combustion in a waste-to-energy facility and/or landfilling the wastes that cannot be reduced, reused, or recycled. Recent changes to federal standards for both landfills and municipal waste combustors now make landfills and combustion much more protective of the environment than in years past and provide for long-term monitoring of key environmental indicators. Our current landfill regulations, which are described in another of the enclosed publications, significantly improve the safety of existing and future municipal solid waste landfills. A major impact of these regulations has been to force substandard facilities to be brought up to standards or to be closed. In 1991, when these regulations were issued, there were about 6,000 landfills in the United States. Now there are less than 2,500.

Besides the publications mentioned above, I have enclosed several others on solid waste management that describe actions that you can take to help fight pollution from solid waste. One of the documents is a publication list. Also, if you have access to the Internet, you can learn even more about our programs and solid waste by visiting our web site at <http://www.epa.gov/osw>.

Thank you for sharing your concerns with us. We appreciate your interest in the environment.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Cotsworth, Acting Director  
Office of Solid Waste

RO 14353