



POSITION PAPER

Don't Trash Joshua Tree National Park Increased Recycling and Diversion Needed, Not Eagle Mountain Mega-Dump

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Joshua Tree National Park is known worldwide as a crown jewel of California's desert, containing unique lands and resources that have been specifically set aside for unimpaired protection and enjoyment by present and future generations. These resources include the remnants of human cultures that span several thousand years and two desert ecosystems—the Mojave and Colorado deserts—that converge dramatically within the national park.

But efforts by Kaiser Ventures, LLC, and the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County (SDLAC) to build the Eagle Mountain Landfill in Riverside County—surrounded on three sides by Joshua Tree National Park—would treat this icon as if it were just another place to take out the garbage.

Operation of the world's largest landfill less than two miles from Joshua Tree's border would threaten much of what the park was set aside to protect¹. Virgin canyons and hillsides would be buried with millions of tons of garbage. This would severely disrupt the surrounding desert ecosystem by subsidizing and inflating the population of predators, such as ravens and coyotes, which in turn would reduce numbers of desert tortoise², reptiles, songbirds, and other wildlife. In addition, light, air, and noise pollution, other impacts to wildlife, and the eventual contamination of groundwater would permanently alter Joshua Tree and the adjacent Chuckwalla Valley.

While these are reasons enough to oppose the Eagle Mountain Landfill, the proposed dump is not needed to meet the trash disposal needs of Los Angeles County. The less harmfully located Mesquite Regional Landfill, along with currently operating landfills, will be adequate to meet the projected solid waste disposal needs of the county through at least 2018. In addition, if countywide diversion rates are increased beyond 50 percent, which has already been achieved elsewhere in California and across the nation, Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County (SDLAC) can expect to have a surplus of waste disposal capacity for decades. Such action would help ensure that Joshua Tree National Park's unique resources remain unspoiled and available for future generations to enjoy as we do today.

Environmental and community organizations have contested the Eagle Mountain Landfill for 18 years because of the adverse impacts it would have on Joshua Tree. In September 2005, U.S. District Judge Robert J. Timlin ruled to overturn the federal land exchange needed for the proposed garbage dump to move forward^{3,4}. Plaintiffs in the case—National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), Donna and Lawrence Charpiet, the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, and the Desert Protection Society—based their opposition on the illegality of the land exchange as well as adverse impacts the garbage dump would have on the park and other adjacent public lands.

Judge Timlin's decision is a major setback for the Eagle Mountain dump. Landfill proponents have 60 days to appeal. However, since the final sale of the landfill to SDLAC is contingent upon the successful and timely resolution of legal challenges to the dump, the judge's decision offers the SDLAC an opportunity to contemplate other options.

Mesquite Landfill Would Meet LA County Demand Through At Least 2018

Los Angeles County's burgeoning population produces vast amounts of solid waste with enormous projected increases. As of 2003, Los Angeles County had an estimated population of 9,871,506⁵. As a result, the county disposed of 38,200 tons of solid waste per day (tpd) in the first three quarters of 2004⁶. Approximately 80 percent of that waste ended up in landfills located within Los Angeles County, while the remainder was shipped to Orange, Riverside, Ventura, San Bernardino, Kern and Kings County landfills⁷.

Over the next 14 years, SDLAC projects a steady increase in solid waste needing disposal, reaching 45,339 tpd by 2018⁸. These figures assume that Los Angeles County meets the requirements stipulated by California Assembly Bill (AB) 939, which required that jurisdictions divert 50 percent of solid waste through recycling by the year 2000⁹. They also assume that the county diversion rate will not increase above 50 percent between 2000 and 2018.

Anticipating routine and scheduled landfill closures, SDLAC has promoted a "waste by rail" system, which involves the transport of garbage to two new mega-dumps: the Mesquite Regional Landfill in Imperial County, active by 2009¹⁰ or 2010¹¹ with a permitted capacity of 20,000 tpd, and Eagle Mountain.

In plans to ensure that solid waste generated by Los Angeles County residents can be adequately disposed of, SDLAC has projected the disposal capacity of landfill and transformation (refuse to energy) options through 2018, assuming a 50 percent countywide diversion rate¹². These projections show a landfill capacity surplus through 2012 that turns into a shortfall of 12,005 in 2013 and 17,355 tpd by 2018 (Table 1). This is due to the closing of and/or expiration of permits for the Puente Hills, Chiquita, Bradley, and Lancaster landfills in 2012-2013, coupled with the county's continued population growth.

However, SDLAC's projections in Table 1 do not include the use of the Mesquite Regional Landfill in Imperial County, which is scheduled to come online in 2009 or 2010 and operate for 100 years with a permitted disposal capacity of 20,000 tpd. With Mesquite factored in, SDLAC will have disposal capacity surpluses for all the years in its projection. The deficit of 17,355 tpd, projected in 2018, turns into a surplus of at least 2,645 tpd, assuming the diversion rate remains at 50 percent (Table 2).

Raising the Bar on Diversion Rates Would Give LA County Surplus for Decades

Los Angeles County should be able to exceed its current 50 percent diversion rate in the coming years, thus further eliminating the need for the Eagle Mountain Landfill while also prolonging the lifespans of existing landfills. Review of diversion rates by cities and counties throughout California and elsewhere in the United States demonstrates that exceeding a 50 percent diversion rate is already possible. Moreover, many of these entities intend to increase their diversion rates even further in the coming decades.

For example, the city of Los Angeles had a diversion rate of 58.8 percent in 2000, exceeded 60 percent in 2002, and has a goal to achieve a diversion rate of 70 percent by 2020^{13,14}. Additionally, in June 2005 Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith unveiled "RENEW LA," a blueprint for the city to "reduce, reuse, recycle, or convert the resources now going to disposal so as to achieve an overall diversion level of 90% or more by 2025"¹⁵. RENEW LA proposes a more overarching waste management hierarchy that focuses "on the management of the material remaining *after* traditional recycling programs...including the environmentally responsible conversion of waste to energy or new 'bio-based' products."

Further north, both the city and county of San Francisco have a diversion rate of 67 percent and the county's board of supervisors recently passed a referendum to achieve a 75 percent diversion rate by 2010, with a goal of zero waste by 2020¹⁶. Santa Barbara County has joined San Francisco in exceeding the 50 percent diversion rate, reaching 59 percent¹⁷.

There are also examples elsewhere in the United States where counties and municipalities are setting and achieving high diversion standards. Back in 1995, Bergen County, New Jersey, achieved a municipal solid waste recycling/composting rate of 62 percent¹⁸. The city of Seattle has a guiding principal and goal to recycle 60 percent of all its solid waste by 2010¹⁹. In 1995, Morris County recycled 63 percent of its total solid waste, surpassing New Jersey's statewide goal of 60 percent²⁰. In Canada, the city of Toronto is progressing toward its goal of reaching a 60 percent residential recycling rate by 2008²¹.

While AB 939 was a landmark piece of legislation in 1989, some California lawmakers have indicated that they would like to see the bar raised further. For example, SB 420, sponsored by California State Senator Joe Simitian in 2005 would have "require[d] the source reduction and recycling plan [of existing agencies] to provide for the diversion of 75 percent of solid waste, on and after January 1, 2015"²². While this bill died in committee, it is safe to assume that similar legislative efforts will continue in the future.

Meeting the Need While Protecting a Crown Jewel

As previously demonstrated, the opening of the Mesquite Regional Landfill by 2010 ensures that SDLAC will have a surplus of waste disposal capacity through at least 2018, the furthest year out in their projections. Moreover, if Los Angeles County achieves by 2018 the diversion rate of present-day San Francisco County, 67 percent, then the disposal capacity surplus would increase to 18,061 tpd (Table 2). With a diversion rate of 60, 65, or 70 percent in 2018—a reasonable range of assumptions considering the successes and goals of other counties—the disposal surplus would swell to 11,713, 16,247, and 20,781 tpd, respectively (Table 2).

One key element of increasing diversion rates includes embracing a "Zero Waste" philosophy based on the concept that landfilling resources is wasteful and inefficient. Zero Waste requires that proper natural resource management, not waste management, is necessary to reduce waste sent to landfills²³. This includes ensuring that products are designed for reuse, repaired or recycled and using new and clean technology to convert the energy potential of waste into fuel, gas, or electricity²⁴.

Conversion technologies are so promising that Los Angeles County released a report in August 2005 stating they will increase diversion from landfills²⁵. The report finds that the conversion technologies evaluated are capable of processing post-recycled solid waste residue, meeting California's stringent environmental regulations, and competing favorably with other solid waste disposal methods on a commercial scale. The next step is to develop a demonstration facility in Southern California with the potential of revolutionizing solid waste management in the United States.

Furthermore, increases in operating efficiency are enabling managers across the country to fit more trash into their landfills than previously anticipated, thus extending landfill lifespans and negating the need for new landfills. As a result, in the last four years, the nation's three largest waste companies—Waste Management, Allied Waste Industries and Republic Services—were able to expand the combined permitted capacity of their 410 dumps by more than one billion tons, even though they buried 882 million tons over the same period of time²⁶. It is reasonable to expect that landfills used by the SDLAC will benefit from these same operating efficiencies, creating an even larger waste disposal surplus than is indicated by the data in this report.

There is no doubt that increasing SDLAC's diversion rate will require additional investment of capital, government involvement, and public education. However, the economic, social, and environmental benefits it would yield are numerous. These include: saved costs from not having to purchase land, build and operate Eagle Mountain and other new landfills and repair the flood-damaged Eagle Mountain rail line; elimination of fossil fuel consumption and air pollution resulting from hauling trash by rail over nearly 200 miles; elimination of the impacts to communities along the rail lines and near the landfills; and elimination of environmental impacts to the Chuckwalla Valley and Joshua Tree National Park.

NPCA's Position

The Eagle Mountain Landfill is unnecessary. It would cause significant impacts to Joshua Tree National Park and deprive future generations of their national heritage. Without the Eagle Mountain Landfill, the SDLAC will have a surplus capacity for Los Angeles County's garbage through at least 2018 at its current 50 percent diversion rate. Additionally, achieving higher diversion rates, which already are being reached in California and in other parts of the United States, would greatly increase SDLAC's future disposal capacity surpluses while protecting one of our nation's most treasured places—Joshua Tree National Park.

As the nation's leading park advocacy organization, we share the concerns of the more than 14,000 park advocates across the nation that wrote to us opposing this ill-conceived project and its threats to Joshua Tree National Park. Kaiser should accept Judge Timlin's recent decision and the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County should follow the judge's lead and abandon this project.

For More Information

For more information about the Eagle Mountain Landfill and its threat to Joshua Tree National Park, please contact National Parks Conservation Association California Desert Program Manager Howard Gross at 760-366-3035, 760-219-4916 (cell), or hgross@npca.org. The mailing address for NPCA's California Desert Field Office is 61325 29 Palms Highway, Suite B, Joshua Tree, CA 92252. Howard Gross and Los Angeles County resident Seth Shteir are co-authors of this report.

Table 1: Los Angeles County Waste Disposal Analysis (Reprinted from Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County²⁷)

Assuming Antelope Valley, Lancaster, and Bradley Landfills received all operating permits for expansion and export to Simi Valley, El Sobrante, & Orange County Landfills at current levels

Expected daily tonnage. 6 day average (tpd-6) based on first and second quarters of 2004 tonnages
Remaining Landfill Capacity at Year's end, Million Tons

Year	Waste need (tpd-6)	Percent	Disposal (tpd-6)	Disposal Capacity (shortfall)	Disposal Within Los Angeles County										Disposal Outside Los Angeles County					Transformation	
					Puente	Calabasas	Scholl	Bradley	Chiquita	Sunshine	Antelope Valley	Lancaster	Burbank	Savage	Orange	Ventura	Riverside	San Bernardino	Other	Commerce	SERRF
2004	77,386	50.0%	38,693	21,698	12,153	1,696	1,323	641	4,967	5,698	1,127	1,318	130	271	3,019	781	3,285	144	236	376	1,528
					36.0	10.1	7.2	4.1	14.2	75.2	17.0	13.2	3.2	4.8		17	101				
2005	79,046	50.0%	39,523	22,419	13,200	1,732	1,351	1,700	4,581	4,581	1,151	1,346	133	277	3,084	796	3,355	147	241	384	1,561
					31.9	9.6	6.8	3.6	12.7	73.7	16.6	12.8	3.2	4.7		16.0	98				
2006	80,166	50.0%	40,083	23,383	13,200	1,757	1,371	1,724	4,689	4,689	1,167	1,365	135	281	3,127	809	3,403	149	244	390	1,583
					27.8	9.1	6.4	3.0	11.3	72.3	16.3	12.3	3.1	4.6		15.0	95				
2007	81,529	50.0%	40,765	22,734	13,200	1,787	1,394	1,753	4,881	4,881	1,187	1,389	137	286	3,181	823	3,461	152	249	396	1,610
					23.8	8.5	5.9	2.5	9.8	70.8	15.9	11.9	3.1	4.5		14.0	92				
2008	82,520	50.0%	41,260	22,251	13,200	1,809	1,411	1,775	5,020	5,021	1,202	1,405	139	289	3,219	833	3,503	154	252	401	1,629
					19.7	7.9	5.5	1.9	8.2	69.2	15.5	11.5	3.1	4.4		13.0	89				
2009	83,340	50.0%	41,670	21,845	13,200	1,826	1,425	1,792	5,136	5,136	1,214	1,419	140	292	3,251	841	3,538	155	254	405	1,646
					15.6	7.4	5.1	1.4	6.6	67.6	15.2	11.0	3.0	4.3		13.0	85				
2010	84,245	50.0%	42,122	21,401	13,200	1,846	1,440	1,812	5,275	5,276	1,227	1,435	142	295	3,287	826	3,576	157	257	409	1,663
					11.6	6.8	4.6	0.8	5.0	66.0	14.8	10.6	3.0	4.2		12.0	82				
2011	85,227	50.0%	42,614	20,922	13,200	1,868	1,457	1,833	5,436	5,436	1,241	1,452	143	298	3,325	791	3,618	159	260	414	1,683
					7.5	6.2	4.2	0.3	3.3	64.3	14.4	10.1	2.9	4.1		11.0	79				
2012	86,015	50.0%	43,007	7,531	13,200	1,885	1,471	C	6,000	8,407	1,253	P	144	301	3,400	756	3,651	160	262	418	1,698
					3.4	5.6	3.7		1.5	61.7	14.0		2.9	4.0		10.0	76				
2013	86,682	50.0%	43,341	(12,005)	C	1,900	1,482		C	11,000	1,800		146	304	3,400	722	7,500	484	264	467	1,867
						5.1	3.2			58.3	13.4		2.8	4.0		9.0	73				
2014	87,420	50.0%	43,710	(12,330)		1,916	1,495			11,000	1,800		147	350	3,400	688	7,500	484	267	467	1,867
						4.5	2.8			54.9	12.9		2.8	3.8		8.0	70				
2015	88,173	50.0%	44,086	(12,707)		1,932	1,507			11,000	1,800		148	350	3,400	655	7,500	484	269	467	1,867
						3.9	2.3			51.5	12.3		2.7	3.7		7.0	67				
2016	88,979	50.0%	44,490	(16,510)		1,950	1,521			11,000	1,800		149	350		619	7,500	484	271	467	1,867
						3.3	1.8			48.1	11.8		2.7	3.6		6.0	64				
2017	89,801	50.0%	44,901	(16,920)		1,968	1,535			11,000	1,800		151	350		585	7,500	484	274	467	1,867
						2.6	1.4			44.7	11.2		2.7	3.5		5.0	61				
2018	90,677	50.0%	45,339	(17,355)		1,987	1,550			11,000	1,800		152	350		549	7,500	484	277	467	1,867
						2.0	0.9			41.3	10.7		2.6	3.4		4.0	58				

Table 2. Los Angeles County Waste Disposal Scenarios Based on Increased Diversion Rates and Waste Disposal at the Mesquite Regional Landfill (20,000 tpd capacity).

Year	Waste need (tpd-6)	Diversion Rate	Disposal (tpd-6)	Disposal available w/out Mesquite Landfill	Disposal shortfall w/out Mesquite Landfill Considered	Disposal capacity with Mesquite Landfill Considered
2018	90,677	50%	45,339	27,984	(17,355)	2,645
2018	90,677	60%	36,271	27,984	(8,287)	11,713
2018	90,677	65%	31,737	27,984	(3,753)	16,247
2018	90,677	67%	29,923	27,984	(1,939)	18,061
2018	90,677	70%	27,203	27,984	781	20,781

Endnotes

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³ National Parks Conservation Association v. Bureau of Land Management, et al. ED CV 00-0041 RT (Mcx), U.S. District Court for the Central District of California - Eastern Division.

⁴ Donna Charpiet, et al. v. U.S. Department of Interior, et al. ED CV 99-0454 RT (Mcx), U.S. District Court for the Central District of California - Eastern Division.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. California Quick Facts. 2005. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06037.html>.

⁶ Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County. Status Report on the Development of a Waste-By-Rail System and the Evaluation of Alternative Technologies. Report No. 6, April 2005, p.1.

⁷ Ibid., p.1.

⁸ Ibid., p.6 -Table 3.

⁹ Ibid., p.1.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ Bowles, Jennifer. “Court deals blow to landfill plans.” *Riverside Press Enterprise*, September 22, 2005. Pp. A1, A4.

¹² Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County, p.1.

¹³ City of Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation. City of Los Angeles Year 2000 AB939 Annual Report. August 2001, p. ES-1.

¹⁴ City of Los Angeles. Landfill Oversight Committee – Final Report. June 2003, p. 1.

¹⁵ Councilman Greig Smith. Recovering Energy, Natural Resources, and Economic Benefit from Waste for LA: A Resource Management Blueprint for the City of Los Angeles 2005 - 2025. June 2005. Los Angeles City Council District 12.

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- ²² Official California Legislative Information. Senate Bill Search, SB 420. 2005. www.leginfo.ca.gov/bilinfo.html.
- ²³ California Integrated Waste Management Board. What is Zero Waste California? April 28, 2005. <http://www.zerowaste.ca.gov/WhatIs.htm>.
- ²⁴ Councilman Greig Smith, p. 1-3.
- ²⁵ County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works and the Los Angeles County Solid Waste Management Committee/Integrated Waste Management Task Force’s Alternate Technology Advisory Subcommittee. Conversion Technology Evaluation Report. August 18, 2005. Prepared by URS Corp., Los Angeles, CA.
- ²⁶ Bailey, Jeff. “Waste yes, Want Not; Rumors of a Shortage of Dump Space Were Greatly Exaggerated.” The New York Times, August 12, 2005, p. C-1.
- ²⁷ Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County, p. 6 – Table 3.