

4 years is too long to wait for cleaner air

Stericycle medical waste incinerator
Graham, NC

What is Stericycle? Stericycle, Inc., is the largest medical waste treatment company in the U. S. Stericycle's 2009 operating profit was greater than \$300 million over a 12-month period. In 2009 Stericycle paid \$2,399.03 in county taxes to Alamance County. In 2009 Stericycle paid \$2,053 in real property taxes to the City of Graham. Stericycle pays no property taxes on the pollution control equipment because it is tax exempt. They also pay a reduced sales tax for equipment purchased.

Where is Stericycle located? In Graham, North Carolina, just east of Burlington. The incinerator's two smoke stacks are visible from Interstate 40/85, looking south from Exit 150 (Jimmy Kerr Rd). It is adjacent to the Old Fields residential development and less than a half-mile from Alamance Community College.

What's wrong with medical waste incineration? Incineration of medical waste is dirty and dangerous, and poses a risk to public health and the environment. Medical waste incineration creates a wide range of harmful air emissions that include mercury, dioxins, furans, particulates (soot), lead, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides (ozone), hydrogen chloride, chlorine, hydrofluoric acid, cadmium, other heavy metals and more which are unknown, untested and unregulated. It is wrong because there are safer alternatives for disposal of medical waste that are approved for use in NC.

How can these air pollutants harm me? These toxic air emissions release pollutants into the air that settle on gardens, crops and soil, and go into rivers, lakes and streams. They pollute the air and we breathe them into our lungs. Individually and collectively these pollutants can threaten our health. Children, pregnant women, and the elderly are especially affected by them. For example:

- **Mercury** – Potent neurotoxin that affects brain development, particularly in unborn and young children. Mercury enters the body by eating mercury-tainted fish.
- **Dioxins** – Some of the most toxic chemicals known to science; can cause cancer, are linked to birth defects, cardiovascular disease, and result in reproductive problems. Dioxins can damage the immune system. Children exposed in utero are most sensitive and vulnerable to its effects.
- **Particulate matter** – Also known as soot and dust. Particulate matter has been linked to asthma, chronic bronchitis, increased lung cancer and cardiovascular health problems. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that Stericycle emits a minimum of 5,000 pounds of particulate matter each year.
- **Lead** – Heavy metal that can damage the brain, nerves, kidney, liver, digestive tract, and heart. Especially toxic to children.
- **Cadmium** – Extremely toxic and causes cancer. Chronic or long-term exposure may result in lung and/or prostate cancer, kidney damage, pulmonary emphysema and bone disease.
- **Greenhouse gases** – Gases (e.g., CO₂) that cause global warming and climate change.

How much waste does Stericycle incinerate? Stericycle's two incinerators burned a record 26.3 million pounds of medical waste in 2008-2009. This number will likely be much higher in the future because of an increased number of new contracts between medical waste generators and Stericycle. The Stericycle incinerator in Haw River burns medical waste from as many as 24 states and from as far away as Puerto Rico.¹

- Official records show that Stericycle actually incinerates 22 to 25 million pounds of waste per year or between 59 and 73 thousand pounds per day.²
- Their permit allows them to burn even more: 33.4+ million pounds per year (91.7 thousand pounds per day).
- NC facilities send 53 to 66% of the total waste burned at Stericycle.³

Why is so much waste incinerated at Stericycle in Graham? Stericycle's incinerators are highly profitable. In 2003 Stericycle made a major investment upgrading their incinerators. Their continued operations allow them to recover this investment and postpone the expense of switching to a cleaner treatment method. Stericycle has switched to cleaner methods for disposal of medical waste in communities in at least 3 states, but it continues to pollute our air in Alamance County.

Is Stericycle operating legally and in "compliance" with the current regulations for air pollutants? They are in compliance with the "old" or current rules. But the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has said the current standards for air pollutants are not protective of human health and the environment. The EPA approved new and more protective rules for levels of air pollutants that can legally be released by medical waste incinerators. The ruling by EPA gives medical waste incinerators until 2014 to come into compliance. We say 4 years is too long to wait for cleaner air. Records show that Stericycle is currently releasing lead at levels 18 times over the new safe limits established by the EPA. Because stack testing of air pollutants is only done once every other year levels of air pollutants from Stericycle can widely vary and can be over or under the EPA limit on any one of the other 727 days not tested.

What is the "Resolution?" A resolution was created by the Mecklenburg County Commissioners to move the date for incinerators to come into compliance with the new EPA rules by 2012 instead of 2014. Many local governments in NC have passed a similar resolution acknowledging that air pollutants from medical waste incinerators are harmful to human health and requesting that the state take action by moving the timeline up by 2 years. They include: Mecklenburg, Chatham, and Orange counties. Cities and towns include Mebane, Haw River, Green Level, Hillsborough, Carrboro, and Chapel Hill.

Who is affected by incineration? We all are. But people living directly downwind of the incinerator are more susceptible to harmful emissions. In Alamance County cancer cases are 226 times the expected number of 1 in a million. Air pollutants from Stericycle pose a higher health risk to:

- People of all ages with chronic respiratory problems such as asthma and allergies.
- Pregnant women and young children due to the toxic impacts of poisons including lead, mercury and dioxin on developing systems.
- The elderly and others with weakened immune systems.

Are incinerators safe with pollution controls? No. Even with pollution control equipment medical waste incinerators emit *tens of thousands of pounds of toxic compounds into the air annually* including hydrochloric acid, cadmium, dioxin, nickel and mercury. Also, uncontrolled emissions from "bypass events" occur during incineration malfunctions. When the bypass stack is open toxic air contaminants are released directly into the air with no pollution controls. The vast majority of these

'bypass events' are allowed under the current operating permit and are not considered a violation by the state. There's no telling what and how much pollution is being released from by-pass events.

Does Stericycle have any record of violations? Yes.

- 2006 -- Violation for two incidents of bypass stacks in open position (excess emissions).
- 2004 -- Violation for exceeding the mercury emissions standard. Civil penalty of \$10,352
- 2002 -- Violation for exceeding the particulate matter standard. Violation for exceeding the mercury emissions standard. Civil penalty of \$8,518.
- 2001 -- Violation for exceeding the particulate matter standard. Civil penalty of \$4,666
- 2000 -- Three violations for exceeding the maximum amount of waste allowed to be burned per hour, for multiple hours (waste charge rate).

Is there a cleaner way to dispose of medical waste that doesn't pollute the air we breathe?

Yes, there are cleaner and safer alternatives to incineration. Regulations now allow more environmentally-friendly alternative technologies to be used in place of incineration for the vast majority of medical waste, such as autoclave and microwave. Stericycle operates some of these new technologies, but continues to operate their two incinerators in Graham as their east coast regional facility.

What can I do about Stericycle's incinerators?

- Join CAN – short for CLEAN AIR NOW – a chapter under the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League working on putting an end to air pollution from Stericycle. Call: (336) 525-2003.
- Watch a video about Stericycle's Haw River incinerator: "Burning Issues in Medical Waste" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqYeianqB5o&feature=related>
- Watch the video: "Dioxin! What Citizens, Workers and Policymakers Should Know," an interview with Dr. Linda Birnbaum, Director, EPA Environmental Toxicology Division at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50E0eGwgPv4>
- Learn more about Stericycle and incineration at: <http://www.bredl-medwaste.org/index.htm>
- Invite CAN to do a presentation for your church, civic group or business about the health risks associated with Stericycle's medical waste incinerators.
- Express your concerns to your local elected officials and your representatives in Raleigh.
- Ask your healthcare providers to find out about and use non-incineration technologies for their medical waste.
- Share this information with your friends, family members and neighbors.
- Call the NC Division of Air Quality immediately: (919) 733-3340 - if you see dark smoke or smell odors coming from the Stericycle incinerator. Keep a record of your call.
- Tell Mark Miller, the President and CEO of Stericycle, to [stop burning medical waste in North Carolina and switch to cleaner alternatives for disposal of medical waste](#) like he has done in communities in Maryland, Missouri and Arizona. Write him at:

Mark Miller, President
Stericycle, Inc.
28161 North Keith Drive
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

^{1,2,3} NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Division of Waste Management. Incinerator Annual Reports 7/1/2000 - 6/30/2009 for Stericycle, Inc.

BLUE RIDGE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE LEAGUE

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