

11.7: The Geosphere as a Waste Repository

As discussed above, mineral processing produces large quantities of waste solids. Other sources of waste solids include ash from coal combustion, municipal garbage, and solid wastes from various industrial processes. Ultimately, these wastes are placed on or in the geosphere. Such measures have an obvious potential for pollution.

One of the most common waste materials that ends up as part of the geosphere is **municipal refuse**, the “garbage” generated by human activities. This material is largely disposed in **sanitary landfills** made by placing the solid wastes on top of the ground or in depressions in the ground and covering it with soil to minimize effects such as windblown waste paper and plastic, emission of odorous materials to the atmosphere, and water pollution. Although “garbage dumps” used to be notably unsightly and polluting, modern practice of sanitary landfilling can result in areas that can be used as parkland, golf courses, or relatively attractive open space. The unconsolidated nature of decaying garbage and the soil used to cover it make municipal landfills generally unsuitable for building construction. Biological decay of degradable organic material ($\{\text{CH}_2\text{O}\}$) in the absence of oxygen generates methane gas by a process represented as



Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, much more effective per molecule at absorbing infrared radiation than is CO_2 , so it is undesirable to release CH_4 to the atmosphere. However, modern sanitary landfills may be equipped with pipes and collection systems so that the methane can be collected and used as a fuel.

Whereas the release of gases, particularly methane, to the atmosphere is a potential air pollution problem with sanitary landfills, contaminated **leachate** consisting of water seeping through the landfilled wastes can pollute water, especially groundwater. This water may contain heavy metals, organic acids, odor-causing organics, and other undesirable pollutants. There are two general approaches to minimizing problems from contaminated landfill leachate. One of these is to construct the landfill in a manner that minimizes water infiltration, thus reducing the amount of leachate produced to lowest possible levels. To prevent the leachate from getting into groundwater, it is desirable to locate the landfill on a layer of poorly permeable clay. In some cases, the bottom of the landfill may be lined with impermeable synthetic polymer liners that prevent leachate from getting into groundwater. In cases where significant quantities of badly polluted leachate are generated, it is best to collect and treat the leachate, usually by biological treatment processes.

Minimization of the quantities of materials requiring sanitary landfill disposal using the best practice of industrial ecology and green chemistry is highly desirable. The best way to do that is by reducing quantities of materials at the source, simply using less material that ultimately will require disposal. Wherever possible, materials, such as packing materials, that ultimately get into landfills should be biodegradable. Recycling programs in which glass, plastic, paper, and food cans are removed from refuse prior to disposal are effective in reducing quantities of material requiring disposal in landfills. Burning of garbage with proper pollution control measures can reduce it to a low-volume ash that can be placed in a landfill. Although not practiced to a significant extent, anaerobic digestion of macerated wet refuse in an oxygen-free digester has the potential to produce methane for fuel use and greatly reduce the mass of the degradable wastes.

Sanitary landfills are not suitable for the disposal of hazardous substances. These materials must be placed in special **secure landfills**, which are designed to contain the wastes and leachate, thus preventing pollution of water, air, and the geosphere. One way in which this is accomplished is with impermeable synthetic membranes that prevent water from seeping into the fill and prevent leachate from draining into groundwater. These landfills are often equipped with water treatment systems to treat leachate before it is released from the system. Unfortunately, many hazardous chemicals **never** degrade and a “secure” chemical landfill leaves problems for future generations to handle. One of the major objectives of green chemistry is to prevent the generation of any hazardous materials that would require disposal on land. The best way to do that is to avoid making or using such materials. In cases where that is not possible and hazardous materials are generated, they should be treated in a way that renders them nonhazardous prior to disposal.

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