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MPCA staff critical of heavy reliance on incin

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Staff Writers

Twenty staff members of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) have criticized the state's increasingly heavy reliance on incineration to solve its garbage problems, saying the potential effects on public health and the environment are not fully known.

In a memo^{11/15} and memorandum sent Tuesday to their boss, MPCA Commissioner Gerald Willet, the staff members said state and county decisionmakers have not given enough attention to recycling, waste reduction and other alternatives to burning garbage.

They noted that incinerators can emit toxic wastes such as dioxin, and that incinerator ash also contains contaminants. They stressed that, in evaluating proposed incinerators to determine if they should receive op-

erating permits, the MPCA has "placed great emphasis on the human health risks associated with dioxin and other toxic emissions."

However, they said, "Many environmental effects of pollutant emissions are incompletely understood. . . . The bottom line is that we cannot fully evaluate all the potential environmental impacts of many toxic pollutant sources. Given these uncertainties, the question arises as to where the burden of proof lies. . . . (Health) risk assessment is not likely to provide definitive answers anytime soon, if ever."

Willet said Thursday that he had not yet read the memo, which was signed by staff members who evaluate the potential environmental and health

effects of incinerators. One of them, Gregory Prall, said no effort was made to seek signatures from throughout the MPCA.

In the memo, the staff members charged that Minnesota's "track record on policy and regulation in the area of waste management has not been admirable." They said that is due to many factors, including "the rapidly changing waste-management scene, legislative inaction in areas such as container deposits, and the waste-management policy and regulatory structure within state government."

All too often, they charged, "There has been insufficient study and planning for efficient waste management."

They noted, however, that the recent merger of the MPCA and the state Waste Management Board "gives us opportunity to correct some of the deficiencies of the past."

Although the MPCA regulates incinerators, the board had been the primary state planning agency for waste-management programs.

Fourteen major incinerators are operating, being built or planned in Minnesota, including the big plant under construction in downtown Minneapolis under the sponsorship of the Hennepin County Board. The first such incinerator began operating in 1982 as part of the state's overall plan to reduce its reliance on landfills, which are a major source of ground water contamination.

If, as planned, all those plants are in full operation in the early 1990s, they will burn at least half of Minnesota's municipal solid waste. An even larger amount, probably 80 to 85 percent, of the garbage generated in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area will be incinerated. According to MPCA staff members, Minnesota will then have a heavier per-capita reliance on garbage incineration than any other state.

A version of the MPCA staff memo was made public yesterday by Twin Cities members of Earth First!, a national environmental group. A group member, Andy Sudbrock, gave copies of the draft memorandum to Hennepin County commissioners. "The staff of the MPCA is having misgivings and second thoughts

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about incineration," Sudbrock told the commissioners.

MPCA staff members said the memo distributed by Earth First! was somewhat different from the version sent this week to Willet. Those staff members stressed, however, that both versions had the same basic message.

Also yesterday, the Hennepin County Board gave preliminary approval on a 4-3 vote to a proposal from the owner of the Minneapolis incinerator to transfer its ownership to a subsidiary of General Electric (GE). Under the complicated arrangement, the new owner essentially would make equity payments into the project required from the current owner, Blount Inc., in exchange for Blount's tax benefits from the project. Blount would lease the plant from the GE subsidiary and operate it.