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City Is Looking at Sewage Treatment as a Source of Energy



Raymond McCrea Jones/The New York Times

The Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in Greenpoint, Brooklyn is known for its architectural design. It opened in 1967 and is the largest of the 14 plants in the city. [More Photos >](#)

By MIREYA NAVARRO
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New York City's sewage presents a daunting and costly challenge: it creates foul odors and often contaminates waterways.

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But the city is now casting its [sewage treatment plants](#) and the vast amounts of sludge, methane gas and other byproducts of the [wastewater](#) produced by New Yorkers, as an asset — specifically, as potential sources of renewable energy.

For the city's [Department of Environmental Protection](#), which is to issue its strategy on Wednesday, it is a shift. Until now, the agency has mainly played the role of [water utility](#) and environmental steward rather than energy producer.

But like other cities around the country looking to reduce both the costs of sewage treatment and disposal and the heat-trapping greenhouse gases emitted in the process, New York is beginning to look at its waste as an untapped resource.

Heating fuel can be extracted from sludge and butanol, an alternative fuel to gasoline, from the algae generated by wastewater. Sewage treatment plants could sell methane

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The Newtown plant is undergoing major renovations. They began in 1998 and are scheduled to be finished in 2014. [More Photos »](#)

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Five methane gas compressors at the Newtown plant handle gas from the digestors. [More Photos »](#)

gas to provide power to homes. Such projects represent a more sustainable long-term approach to managing a wastewater treatment process that costs the city about \$400 million annually, not including capital investments.

“There’s nothing in here that’s pie in the sky,” Caswell F. Holloway, the city’s commissioner of environmental protection, said of the plan. “While we’re early in the process, it’s real.”

New Yorkers currently produce some 1.3 billion gallons of [wastewater](#) daily. The agency is seeking vendors to find uses for the resulting daily yield of 1,200 tons of sludge, a residual that is currently sent to landfills in Suffolk County, N.Y., and Virginia.

City officials, who hope to have a contract by 2013, said the solid could be harvested for gases that produce clean energy and could be used in more traditional ways, too, as fertilizer or as paving and building materials.

The biggest potential source of energy, officials said, is the methane gas from sewage treatment plants’ digesters. About half of the methane produced by the city’s plants is already used to meet about 20 percent of the energy demands of the city’s 14 sewage plants, whose electric bills run to a total of about \$50 million a year. Now the city wants to market the other half, which is burned off and wasted.

Through a partnership with National Grid that is already in the works, officials said, the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in Brooklyn is expected to add enough methane gas to the city’s natural gas network next year to heat 2,500 homes.

City environmental officials said they were also seeking private partners to develop a plant to produce both electricity and heat or steam near its Wards Island Wastewater Treatment Plant; the power would heat the plant and be sold to the market.

The agency is also studying proposals for solar and wind projects on Staten Island, including one that would place solar panels on the 200,000-square-foot roof of the Port Richmond Wastewater Treatment Plant, and another for a 1.5-megawatt wind turbine at the Oakwood Beach Wastewater Treatment Plant.

“If what you’ve got is lemons, of course you try to make lemonade,” said Eric A. Goldstein, a lawyer with the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) in New York who monitors the environmental agency. “It’s taking existing infrastructure and outfitting it to help solve other city problems.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 10, 2011

An article on Wednesday about New York City’s plans to use sewage as a source of renewable energy misstated the amount of wastewater generated daily by New Yorkers. It is estimated at 1.3 billion gallons, not tons.

A version of this article appeared in print on February 9, 2011, on page A23 of the New York edition.

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