

“SA landfill sites a ticking time bomb”

Economic development, population growth and rapid urbanisation continues to contribute to an increase in waste generation, placing continued pressure on South Africa’s landfill sites.

The Department of Environmental Affairs (“DEA”) says 98 million tonnes of waste is deposited across South Africa’s 826 landfill sites every year.

The government’s ambition is to have a zero waste to landfill objective – through avoid, reduce, reuse, recycle, recover, treat and dispose, but the current lack of alternatives means landfills need to be used for the foreseeable future.

Also, South Africa’s waste is going to waste – the National Pricing Strategy for Waste Management says that the country disposes of at least R825 billion worth of recoverable resources each year.

Johan van den Berg, MD of Averda South Africa, says with landfills a reality for years to come, it is crucial that licensed and legally compliant facilities are used to help minimize negative consequences.

Landfills in the Western Cape and Gauteng, for example, are on the brink of reaching capacity.

Earlier this year, the provincial Environmental Affairs Department warned that the area could be headed for a waste crisis.

According to van den Berg, although the Western Cape has done much to implement the waste hierarchy most of the other provinces need to address its approach to waste management.

According to environmental and social justice organisation Groundwork, nearly half of the country’s 1 327 documented waste dumps are unlicensed. In addition, 58 highly hazardous landfill sites are not licensed.

“These are illegally operated receptacles for uncontrolled, untreated and unmanaged waste,” says van den Berg. “Conversely, licensed landfills are tightly controlled, closely monitored and highly regulated to mitigate against any negative consequences on health and wellbeing.”

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While it is not legal to allow an unlicensed dump to operate, many municipalities do not take the necessary steps to control them or convert them into licensed landfills because of the costs and complexities associated with compliance.

Unfortunately, lack of enforcement has given rise to an industry that’s plagued by unlicensed providers which, as well as compromising hygiene standards, has resulted in severe under-pricing that’s a significant barrier to success.

“The costs associated with building and managing landfill sites, like those required in the country, can run well over R100 million and the low-cost nature of waste management can make it hard for companies to foresee getting a return on this investment,” explains van den Berg.

To address this, he believes that government representatives need to work with waste management providers to make compliance a priority, for the sake of the economic, environmental and physical wellbeing of communities.

“Expertise in waste management exists to support provinces and municipalities in their journey to compliance and the promotion of these industries is essential for a flourishing sector that prioritises safety in all of its endeavours,” he concludes.

