

Waste refuse crisis looms for South Africa

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Landfills are filled with disease and are filling up quickly. Picture: Joshua L. Jones/Athens Banner-Herald/AP

Cape Town - South Africa disposes of R825 billion worth of recoverable and recyclable waste every year with much of it ending up in landfills and dumping sites.

Around 98 million tonnes of waste is deposited across the country's 826 landfill sites each year according to the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA).

In the State of Waste Report released by the DEA in May, it is estimated that 42 million tonnes of general waste was collected in 2017, with only 11% recycled and only 7% of the country's 38 million tonnes of hazardous waste was re-used or recycled.

Landfills in the Western Cape are on the brink of capacity with economic development, population growth and rapid urbanisation the main factors contributing to an increase in waste generation.

The DEA warned earlier this year that both the Western Cape and Gauteng regions could be heading for a "waste crisis" if solutions were not implemented.

Cape Town recorded more than 2.5 million tonnes of waste from July 2017 to June 2018, with more than 520 000 tonnes of that diverted for recycling, representing 19.39% recycling.

According to Johan van den Berg, managing director of waste management company Averda South Africa, it is “crucial” that licensed and legally compliant facilities are used to help minimise negative consequences.

Van den Berg said the Western Cape has done much to implement the waste hierarchy, but most of the other provinces needed to address its approach to waste management.

He points to the findings of a 2016 report by Statistics SA into the state of basic service delivery, which showed that nearly a third of households nationally lack any kind of refuse facilities.

Uncollected refuse at street level leads to thriving bacteria, insect and vermin populations, increasing the risk of diseases like salmonella, typhoid or enteric fever.

Similarly, waste dumps are breeding grounds for carriers of disease, like rats. Illegally dumped waste has also been linked to respiratory illnesses.

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. Licensed landfills are tightly controlled, closely monitored and highly regulated to mitigate any negative consequences on health and wellbeing,” said Van den Berg.

He added that the costs associated with building and managing landfill sites could run over R100 million.

According to the City of Cape Town the waste minimisation/recycling budget for 2017/2018 was more than R118 million.

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